



SNOWZONE

CHAPTER 1

Rick Speed looked up just in time to miss a large woman coming out the jailhouse door.

Inside, he wrote his name and Luis's name in the log. The guard spun the book around, glanced at it, and then spoke into a portable radio.

Rick sat at a battered vinyl-topped table across from a handsome Latino. The client's black hair was pulled into a short ponytail. His skin was a soft ivory color. He folded his hands in front of him on the table and looked bored and menacing at the same time.

Rick threw a yellow legal pad on the table. "I'm Rick Speed, Luis. Billy Thompson sent me. I'm gonna get your bond set and hopefully get you out of here. When were you arrested?"

"Night before last night and it's 'Lew-ees' not 'Louis.'"

"Arrested where?"

"Eye ninety-five. At Pooler."

"Why did they stop you?" Rick asked, looking up from writing.

"Speeding."

“How fast?” Rick asked, writing again.

“I don’t know. Sixty-five, seventy.”

Rick stopped writing. “Someone fingered you.”

Luis looked at Rick closely. “No.”

“Yes. Cops won’t stop you unless you’re more than ten miles over the speed limit. They won’t stop you around here unless you’re over seventy-five.”

Luis shook a cigarette out of a crumpled pack and lighted it. He blew smoke at the ceiling.

“No one would call the cops on me.”

“Someone did. Someone who knew your schedule.” Rick adjusted the yellow legal pad in front of him.

Luis looked at him, and then shook his head slowly.

“OK, believe what you want,” Rick said. “Tell me what happened. Start when the cops got behind you.”

“They had blue lights. I pulled over. A cop comes to my window, and I get out. He asks to see my license and insurance. I show him. Another cop comes up in a car. He’s got no uniform.”

“What kind of car?” Rick asked, doodling on the pad.

“Regular car. Him and the cop in the uniform go to the cop car with blue lights. They come back in about a minute and the cop asks me if he can look in my car. I tell him no. He shrugged with his hands. They looked anyway.”

“Did they have you sign a paper?”

“No.”

“Then what happened?”

“He ask me for keys and ask me to come to his car and sit in the back seat, while him and the other cop look in my car.”

“They find anything?”

“A package. Then they say I’m under arrest. They talk a while and then bring me here.”

“Mr. Thompson says the cops found one kilo of cocaine,” Rick said.

“Bullshit. I had forty keys in the car.”

Rick’s eyebrows shot up. “Forty?”

Luis nodded and blew smoke through his nose. “Forty keys, for sure.”

“Either of the cops take anything out of the trunk?” Rick asked.

Luis tilted his head. “I couldn’t see alla time. Could have.”

“How much is forty keys worth?” Rick asked.

“Eighteen thou each. Over seven hundred thousand.”

“But you can’t prove there were forty. It’s your word against two cops. Besides, you don’t want to say you had that much. You just might never get out of here. The bigger the load, the harder it is to get bonded out.”

Luis inhaled. “Can you get me a bond?”

“Can you make it if I do?”

“Si. For sure.”

“OK, I’ll file the motion; get the hearing as soon as possible. You need me, call me.” Rick pushed a card across the table as he stood up.

Rick returned to the lobby. He signed out and walked around the building to the booking area.

“Hey, Tony,” Rick said, “get me the booking sheet on Luis Ortenza, please.”

The deputy riffled through a drawerful of five-by-seven cards, plucked one out, and pushed it across the desk to Rick. Rick turned the card over. The arresting officer’s signature was Rodney Parker. Below Parker’s name another signature was scrawled, and printed under that in block

letters: James Morrow, GBI.

James Morrow. Morrow and Parker just might have lifted thirty-nine keys of cocaine off a drug mule. If true, they had just funded their retirement plan, and probably no one could prove it.

“Get what you want?” Tony asked. Rick smiled and nodded.

CHAPTER 2

Rick exited the elevator on the second floor. Billy Thompson looked like a model out of CQ. All spic and span, with a hundred dollar tie.

“Do you know what Luis told me?” Rick asked Billy.

“Let me guess.”

“Do you know Rodney Parker?”

“Never heard of him.” Billy smiled slyly. “Did you see the booking card?”

“Yeah.” Rick leaned closer. “You think they took the dope?”

“Could be. Wouldn’t it be nice?”

“If we could prove it.”

Billy held up his hands, palms out. “Hey, I’ll help all I can, but don’t blab it around. The firm wouldn’t like it if I was trying to bust a cop.”

"I'd like to nail Morrow. I bet he and Parker took the dope, left one key in the car to nail Luis, and put the rest away."

Billy followed a girl down the hall with his eyes until she stopped to wait for the elevator, "Probably. It'd be tempting, wouldn't it?"

"No."

"I mean if there was no chance of getting caught. It might be worth the risk. How much do you think forty keys are worth? A million?"

"Luis said eighteen thousand a key. Over seven hundred thousand."

"That's a lot of money. You keep me posted." Billy pointed a finger at Rick. "Maybe you can nail Morrow somehow. Serve him right for what he did to you."

Rick watched as Billy disappeared into the elevator, following the young girl.

Thinking about that kind of money was like buying lottery tickets--playing "what if" and all the while knowing it would never happen. He wasn't a criminal or a thief. Would taking it make him a criminal? Or is stealing from criminals allowed? He saw himself in the lead role with Loraine Bracco in the movie Scam. She stole the crook's money and got away.

Rick went back into the sheriff's office and sat down in front of Chief Deputy Wright's desk.

Norman looked up. "Counselor. Get you a cup of coffee?"

"Thanks, but I don't think so."

"You going flying Saturday?" Norman asked.

"Sure, gotta practice a lot to beat you." Rick looked around the office, making sure no one was within their arc of conversation. "Not to change the subject, but what can you tell me about Rodney Parker?"

"I know him. He was in the police standards training class about a year ago. Good rookie. Graduated from the Academy in the top ten. Why?"

Rick told the chief deputy about the drug bust and why he believed Morrow was dirty, emphasizing that Morrow alone had been at the trunk when it had been opened. Rick speculated that Morrow could have dumped it on the shoulder, out of sight. Then, when Parker brought the perp in, Morrow scooped it up.

"It would surprise me if Parker's involved. He's only been on a short time. Besides, he was gung-ho in training. At least in the classes I taught. What's his connection to Morrow?" Wright asked.

Rick shrugged. "I don't know. Could you find out if there is one?" Rick glanced over his shoulder.

Norman leaned closer. "Like?"

"Like I don't know," Rick said, thinking about it. "Maybe they knew each other from before Parker joined Pooler PD, or something like that?"

"You'd want it done discreetly, naturally."

"Most certainly."

"Sure. I'll nose around. Just because you're such a good friend."

Rick stood. "Thanks Norman, I owe you one."

"Nothing to it. Glad to help."

Rick started to leave as Norman moved a tray of paper clips around his desk. "And if they're dirty?"

"That'd really be nice," Rick said, hoping they were.

* * *

Four blocks away, Billy Thompson got off the elevator in the Trust Company Bank building

and walked down the hallway to the offices of Livingston, Barker, Fleming and Associates. As he walked past the bronze name plate it flashed through his mind that if they kept the same size letters the plate would have to be longer to fit his name onto it.

He and Elizabeth Livingston had married two years before. Since then, he'd worked his butt off for the firm, spending long hours at the office, billing lots of time, babying the clients. The only time he took off was on the weekend jaunts to Atlantic City once or twice a month. When he and Libby fought, he would always say that his gambling was only a small sin, nothing he couldn't afford.

Walking through the reception room, he spoke to his secretary, then opened the door to his office and threw his coat on the replica Louis XIV chair. He sat and paged through the mail on the corner of his polished walnut desk.

"Do you want your calls now, Mr. Thompson?" his secretary asked, poking her head through the door.

"Not right now." He flipped through his Rolodex.

His secretary turned to go, then stopped. "Mr. Livingston would like you to attend the partners' meeting at six-thirty this evening, then drinks after."

He twisted out a Rolodex card as the secretary closed the door, and then punched numbers on his phone.

While the phone rang, he loosened his tie and slipped his loafers off, rubbing the bottoms of his stocking feet against the carpet.

"Pronto?" a voice answered.

"Uh, yes. Is Mr. A in? This is the lawyer."

"Espera, un momento."

Billy heard Reggae music playing, then a rustling sound close to the other end of the phone.

“Amigo, how are you?” Hector Affianta asked.

“I’m fine, Mr. A. I have some news for you.”

“Good. What is the news?”

“Your contact says The Man took the offer.”

There was quiet breathing on the other end.

“Would The Man have done it?”

“It’s happened before, but not often.”

“Can you find out?” Hector asked, his voice calm.

“Maybe. I’ve got somebody working on it.”

“Good. By the way, keep my contact on vacation. If he comes up with his passport, I want to know before he uses it. Comprende?”

“Yes, sir. It’ll be a few days before the application is made anyway.”

“There’s no hurry,” Hector replied. “By the way, give me your bill.”

“It’ll probably take fifteen hours to finish everything up.”

“No problemo.”

“Thank you, sir.” Billy leaned back in his chair, fully satisfied.

“De nada. Keep in touch. I want to know pronto if anything changes. Understand?”

“Yes sir.” Billy said.

The line clicked and Billy put the phone down. He propped his feet on the desk. Fifteen thousand in two days. He’d get some breathing space at least. Of course, the interest--vig, to those familiar with loan sharking--at ten percent per day would keep running. He needed a lot more, but something was better than nothing. The intercom interrupted him. “Mrs. Thompson’s on the line, sir,” his secretary said. He frowned and picked up the phone.

“Hello, Libby.”

“Well, you could sound a little more cheerful.”

Billy knew it didn't matter what he said or how, the words, or the tone of his voice, or the meaning she assigned the words, it would be just a little awry in his wife's opinion.

“Well darling, I just found out that we're having a partners' meeting this evening, then drinks after, so don't expect me till ten or eleven.”

“I knew you'd find a way of getting out of decorating the club for the ball.” She sounded disappointed.

Billy felt a touch of pleasure. “Hey, I forgot that.”

“Now you sound cheerful.”

“Sorry. I may have to be out of town this weekend also. A client in Miami. Very important.”

She didn't reply.

Billy waited a few seconds, but couldn't outlast her. “Hey, you still there?”

“Yes, William. I am still here.”

Uh-oh, using his first name, clueing him that she was irritated.

“Don't be mad, honey. It's just business.”

“You seem to be away from me a lot.”

Billy thought he detected a touch of disappointment. She never ceased to amaze him. When they were together, he could do nothing right, then, at odd times she seemed to want him around more.

“You want your daddy to make me partner, don't you?”

“Of course, but don't you have an associate that can go?”

“I can't palm this client off. If they pay the big bucks, they want the big man.” He chuckled.

Billy heard muffled words.

“Tabitha says hello.”

“Tell her I love her. I love you, too.”

“Bye. I love you,” Libby said.

“I’ll be home later.” Billy kissed into the phone and hung up.

He hit the intercom button. “Michelle, bring me the Ortenza file.”

In a few moments she placed the file on his desk.

The phone rang.

“Thompson,” he said abruptly.

“Billy?” a woman’s voice asked.

Billy’s recognized the voice. “Betty, what’re you doing?”

“Dad’s gone to Atlanta, and I’m alone. I thought we could go for a drink, if you have time.”

“I’ve got a meeting at six-thirty, but I’ll meet you at the Hyatt at eight or a little after.”

“I’ve been thinking about what you asked me--about the loan,” she went on. “I really need to know why you need it.”

“We’ll talk about it tonight. Not now, OK?”

Billy heard her sigh.

“OK. I’ll see you there.”

CHAPTER 3

Hector Affianta cursed as he replaced the phone. He waved Ramon away with a whisk of his hand and walked across the opulently furnished living room to stand by the oversized picture window. He stuffed his hands in his pockets, swore under his breath and scrutinized the ninety-foot yacht at the end of his yard. A large cruiser bullied along the Intercoastal Waterway, pushing huge waves away from its bow and causing the small fourteen-foot motorboat tied to the seawall to bob up, then down, ducking below the wall.

He did not like bad news. He wondered why Luis had not completed his mission, but had gotten caught by the cops instead. Forty kilos of cocaine, gone. He played the route over in his mind and reviewed the standard operating procedures for delivery. He knew there were no flaws. The procedures had been in place for two years and he had only lost one or two loads in that time.

His contacts informed him of the mule profile the police looked for. The FBI had disseminated the profile characteristics to local police agencies along Interstate 95 and every police officer watched for the profile identifiers. He had taken extreme care to have his mules educated so that deliveries would get through. They were told not to speed. Don't drive late at night, always stop and get a motel around ten o'clock. Do not eat or drink in the car and do not throw trash on

the floor. No pillows or blankets in the car and always pump your own gas. Above all, do not talk to the clerks in gas stops along the way. And it was also a good idea to have a baby seat in the back with a couple of toys. His instructions were flawless. If his delivery mule followed them, his car would be the antithesis of the druggie profile.

His thoughts circled back to the principal question again. How had Luis gotten caught?

Ramon brushed his elbow. "May I get you another drink, Jefe?"

Hector waved his hand. "Si. Un altro."

Richard Benning sat in an overstuffed chair near the French doors fifteen feet from Hector. He raised his empty glass as Ramon turned. "I could use another one also, Ramon. Thank you."

Ramon took his glass.

"Is there a problem?" Richard Benning asked, looking at Hector.

"Si. Uno problemo."

Hector chewed on his bottom lip and watched the yacht disappear behind the wall enclosing his yard.

"Luis has been captured," Hector said.

"Before or after he delivered?"

Hector sighed. "Before."

Benning waited. "So what happens now?"

"Luis had one key with him when he was arrested. I'm wondering what happened to the rest."

Benning was silent for a beat, and then he sighed also. "We needed that sale."

"Luis's bond won't be filed for a few days. That'll be enough time to find out what happened to the shipment," Hector said.

Hector sat opposite of Benning. "Maybe you could pull some strings. Get some information. Find out what really went down."

“I wouldn’t want to do that, except as a last resort,” Benning said. “My involvement must be minimal. Remember, I’m just a consultant.”

Hector leaned forward and propped his elbows on his knees. “You want to see this work just as much as anyone. Right?”

Benning nodded his head in agreement.

“Then you got to do your part. Whatever that may be.”

“I agree. But my part must be covert. I can’t be obvious. As far as the movement is concerned, I don’t exist.”

Hector’s anger flared. “You damned spooks always got to play your little games. Sneaking around acting like you’re not involved. Hell, you want Castro out too. Probably more than we do.”

“We must maintain our unity of purpose, Hector. We all want the same thing, but a free Cuba is not an important item on the current government’s policy agenda at this moment. Our politician’s attitudes are to remain aloof and wait. They figure that now Cuba’s on it’s own, without any help from their Communist friends, Castro will either be deposed or he’ll die of old age. It’s unpopular to talk about armed invasion. You know that.”

“I don’t give a damn! I’m not going to just sit and wait for that son-of-a-bitch to die of old age,” Hector said.

“And neither am I. But I must work within the required parameters.”

Hector signaled Ramon to bring their drinks from where he had stopped a few feet away.

“I don’t think the cops took the snow,” Benning said. “Dirty cops are opportunist’s, they’re not particularly brazen. Unloading thirty-nine keys of coke onto the side of the Interstate, in full view of the mule would be very brazen. It doesn’t fit.”

Ramon brought Hector a tall, frosted glass, filled to the top with rum punch and then handed

Benning his glass.

Hector sipped and cleared his throat. "The other explanation is that Luis stashed the snow, then set himself up for the arrest as a cover. I don't think he's that smart. Anyway, he knows I won't buy it. He does anything like that, he's a dead man."

Benning sipped his drink and nodded. "I'm not saying the cops couldn't have taken it. It's possible, just not highly probable."

Hector motioned to Ramon. "I want you to go to Savannah, Georgia. Do an errand for me."

"Si Jefe," Ramon said.

Hector took another sip of his drink. Ramon was a good man. He had been with him for ten years and had always done as he was told. Ramon could be relied upon to enforce the rules. He paid him enough. More than he had earned in Cuba as a private in the Polizia Nacional.

"When do I leave?" Ramon asked.

Ramon quaffed another mouthful of his rum punch, and then looked appreciatively at Ramon. "You make a very good drink hermano," Ramon said, using the familiar and affectionate name for brother. "I'd like you to leave inmediatamente."

"I'll take the Gringo," Ramon said.

Hector paused, giving it some thought. "Si. That would be good."

"Let me refill your glass, Jefe." Ramon then turned to Benning. "Another Cubre Libre, Senior?"

Benning declined, then hunched forward. "I'll get you copies of the arrest reports. I can do that without raising any suspicions if I make it look like an inquiry from the FBI or the DEA. It's routine for them to ask for reports from local agencies on drug trafficking. That'll give Ramon a starting point."

"Gracias," Hector said. "We need to get to the bottom of it. Losing three quarters of a million

will delay our plans. I don't want any delays."

Benning stood. "Neither do I. I've been working on this since nineteen sixty-one and I'm not getting any younger."

Hector stood and watched as Benning opened the French doors, walked across the lawn and got into the small motorboat tied to the seawall. The motor turned over and Benning gave a casual wave as he headed for the center of the Intercoastal Waterway.

Hector returned the wave. The CIA was a necessary evil. They always wanted everyone else to do the dirty work and if things got dicey, they'd bail out, leaving you hanging. Just like they did in Cuba at the Bay of Pigs. Hector's father had been in that invasion force and the CIA had abandoned them. Hector would never forgive them. Not only for abandoning the effort, but also for letting his father die in Castro's prison after having been castrated and his fingernails and toenails extracted.

He planned to get as much as possible out of them, and then he'd repay old debts. He would get his satisfaction.

He felt Ramon at his elbow. Hector handed him the glass and watched as he went into the other room. Ramon and the Gringo would go to Savannah and see if they could find the cops who arrested Luis. Find out who had his snow. The more he thought about it, the more he suspected Luis had taken it. Luis had been in his organization for only a year; having come to his attention after one of his lounge managers had hired him.

Hector settled onto the couch. He counted on the seven hundred and twenty thousand from Luis's load of snow to make another installment on armaments for the project. For three years, he had supplied the Free Cuba of Castro League with arms and ammunition for the liberation of Cuba. Carlos mas Palmas was the titular leader of the FCCL, but it was Hector who was responsible for getting the armaments and ammunition necessary for the invasion.

Hector knew they would succeed, even with this setback. The ship was being purchased and the weapons and supplies would soon be transported from their hiding places and loaded. One or two more purchases and they would be ready. Benning was providing training bases and military instructors in Louisiana. The FCCL had a force of ten thousand well-trained patriots, ready to fight.

After Cuba was liberated, Carlos mas Palmas would be ensconced as the provisional president, but Hector would be the true Liberator of his country.

He stretched his legs in front of him. The United States had never been his home. Sure, he'd done well, but selling cars and running lounges was not his idea of making a living. His ambitions had grown as fast as a water palm when he had made his first million transporting cocaine up the eastern seaboard to New York and Canada. Now, ten years later, he was ready to liberate Cuba and control the cocaine importation for an entire country. He would be as important as El Presidente and a lot richer.

Ramon came back into the room and stood silently. Hector began telling him about Luis and the missing shipment of cocaine and what he was expected to do when he got to Savannah. Forty-five minutes later, Hector asked Ramon if he understood everything. Ramon said he did.

"And don't make any contact with Thompson. I don't want the lawyer knowing more than he has too," Hector said.

"Si Jefe."

"Viya con Dios," Hector said.

As Ramon walked quietly from the room, Hector took a heavy slug from his glass.

He didn't trust lawyers, but realized he needed them along the pipeline to the northern markets. Occasionally, his mules were arrested transporting drugs and a good padrone always posted their bail and got them to South America before they could be convicted. The bonds were bigger than when he started in the business. Back then, it was nothing to get fifty or sixty

thousand dollar bonds set for a mule carrying twenty or thirty kilos. Now, it was a hundred thousand and that could be for one or two keys. All of it was overhead, but a hell of a high overhead.

He opened a black book by the telephone, found a number and dialed. Constanzia had gone to her sister's home in Key West on Tuesday past. It wasn't that he was in love with her, but she had been with him for five years now, and he missed her presence. He was not a solitary person. He liked people around. He liked the control.

He listened to the answering machine, then left a message for Constanzia to call him immediately, becoming irritated that she was gone.

He dialed the phone again and waited for Carlos mas Palmas to answer. Carlos picked up on the second ring.

"What about the ship?" Hector asked without preamble.

"The deal's almost ready to close. A couple of weeks more," Carlos replied.

"Why so long?"

"Because the oil man has to transfer some funds before we can close the deal."

"Bueno," Hector said. "I can understand that."

"I don't see any problems with it," Carlos said.

"Soon, Mi Presidente, we will free our country." Hector smiled into the phone.

"With your help, hermano. You and I will be the liberators of our country, together." Hector could hear the pleasure in Carlos's voice.

"It will be a life-long dream realized," Hector said.

"Our dream will free millions and restore democracy after so long. By the way, will you be able to raise the eight hundred thousand dollars?"

"It's on the way, compadre. It'll be available when we close the deal on the ship."

“You are a great man, Hector. So unselfish.”

“Gracias, Mi Presidente.”

Carlos chuckled. “Not yet. But soon, very soon.”

CHAPTER 4

When Constanzia Salazar hung up the phone, she was smiling. Her big sister always took care of her. Rosie had been there when their father beat their mother and every kid unlucky enough to get close to him. She was always protective and loving. Inserting herself between the fists and the smaller children, Constanzia included. She had been knocked to the floor more times that Constanzia could count, pleading with their father to beat her and not the babies.

Constanzia had arrived in Savannah after driving two and a half hours from Jacksonville. Luis had called her at the Airport Ramada Inn, where she was waiting.

He was in jail, but everything was OK. He reassured her that once his bond was set in a couple of days, he'd be out.

He seemed as confident as when she first met him at Hector's house in Miami Beach the year before. She felt a glow, thinking about him again. He was handsome, and most of all he respected her, never swearing and always behaving courteously and with tenderness.

It all started when they talked, as she recovered from one of Hector's rages. Hector had slapped her a couple of times, called her a putana and humiliated her in front of a guest.

"Hector treats me so bad," she told Luis when they were alone on the patio. "He doesn't appreciate me and he's stingy. All the money he's got, and he gives me so little. I need money to

look nice for him, but he doesn't care," she sniffled.

He stroked her hair. "I will give you everything. Come away with me."

At first she refused to take him seriously, but he kept telling her how beautiful she was and how he would take care of her. They made love for the first time a week later, in Hector's bed.

Over the next few weeks, Luis wouldn't stop pressing her. Finally, she agreed to go off with him for a few days, kind of a vacation, a trial run. She told Hector she was going to Key West to see her sister, Rosie, if that was okay. He grumbled at first, but finally agreed. Then she called Rosie and asked her to cover if Hector called. Rosie told her she would and please be careful.

Early the next morning she and Luis left Miami and drove north to Vero Beach.

At dinner that evening he asked her, "If I had enough money for us to live on, would you leave Hector?"

She looked at him, and said maybe. His asking her made her want to touch him. She reached across the table and stroked his hand.

They left Vero Beach the next day, and in the early afternoon checked into the Ramada Inn at the airport in Jacksonville. When they got in their room, Luis opened a gym bag packed with hundreds, fifties, and twenties. More money than she'd ever seen. They counted it. Seven hundred and two thousand dollars in all. They spread it on the bed and lay on it, laughing and giggling like kids. They covered themselves with it and made love.

"I have to do the next step alone," Luis told her later. "You must stay here for a few days. I'll call, and then you'll have to do something for me. For us."

She promised to follow his instructions. They were set for life, and she no longer had to worry about Hector. Luis had rescued her. He made her believe it. She wanted to believe it.

The next morning when she awoke, Luis and the money were gone. Finally, he called and told her to come to Savannah. She did as he told her and she had found the Hyatt Hotel on Bay

Street, gotten a room, and was going to the jail to see Luis.

Fifteen minutes later she rode the elevator from the third floor of the parking garage, across the street from the Chatham County Courthouse and Jail complex. Luis had a plan; she wished she knew the details, but he kept them secret, just telling her not to worry, he'd take care of everything. She would feel better if she knew where the money was.

Constanzia wrote her name with a flourish in the jail logbook checked the clock on the wall and wrote 10:00 o'clock in the space for time in. The guard told her to take a seat until visiting hour began.

She sat on a gray metal chair for the next ten minutes.

The room was full of people, mostly black and with lots of children. Their conversation made a low buzzing sound as background noise to the muffled clanking of steel doors being opened and closed in the building. She was glad she had worn perfume. She could bend her head down to her chest and inhale the pleasant odor of Embrace, blotting out the stale urine smell of the jail.

The guard rose lethargically from his seat, cleared his voice and announced. "All visitors for detainees with last names beginning with M, N, and O, go to the windows."

Constanzia sat on a metal stool in front of a thick glass window with embedded wire. The wire reminded her of the fence around the two chickens her family had kept in their backyard in West Miami, when she and Rosie were children. The two chickens were the only source of fresh eggs until some neighbor had stolen them. Then they did without.

Men in orange prison overalls begin filling up the spaces behind the windows. Luis sat on the stool on the other side of the window.

He touched his fingers to the pane. She touched her side of the glass.

"Todo es perfecto. My lawyer is going to get a bond set soon, then I get out and we go." He smiled at her. "Where do you want to go?"

She leaned closer to the glass, speaking through the metal grill with holes. “Spain. Seville. But how do we get you out?”

“When you leave you go to the desk, pick up my stuff. I’ve already told them. You’ll find two keys. One is to unit sixteen of the Dunn Avenue Mini Storage. You can find the address in the Jacksonville phone book. The other key is to a car in the storage shed. Drive the car back to Savannah, then come and see me again. I’ll tell you what to do.”

“I drove two and half hours up here already.”

Luis looked at her. “Tomorrow will be fine.”

She repeated his instructions, making sure she understood. Then she whispered, “Luis, where is the money?”

“Don’t worry, Bella, it’s safe. We will go together and get it.”

She smiled and touched the glass again. He got up as she left.

At the front desk she asked for Luis’s “stuff”. The clerk slid a receipt in front of her and as she signed it, he handed her a bulky manila envelope.

She got back to her rental car, started the engine, and got the air conditioner running. The envelope contained Luis’s wallet, comb and two keys, one with a tag imprinted “Dunn Avenue Mini Storage.” The other was imprinted with a Cadillac emblem. Four one-hundred-dollar bills were in the wallet.

She paid the ticket taker, thinking that soon she would have the money and be free of Hector forever.

CHAPTER 5

Rick stood as the door on the dais opened. His butt ached from sitting on the hard wooden benches in the courtroom for the past twenty minutes.

The bailiff cried out, "All rise. Hear ye, hear ye. The Honorable Superior Court of Chatham County is now in session. All ye who wish draw near and be heard. The Honorable Raiford Clemmons presiding."

Judge Clemmons sat in the high-backed chair situated between the flags of the United States and the state of Georgia. He briskly told everyone to be seated.

The clerk announced that preliminary and bond hearings would be dealt with first.

Judge Clemmons adjusted his large, black-rimmed glasses and rustled some papers in front of him.

Rick sat in the first row. To his left was the jury box with fourteen chairs, filled with men and women dressed in uniforms of various police departments.

Three men dressed in civilian clothes sat on the back row. James Morrow was at the end.

Morrow casually looked at Rick and then away, giving no sign of recognition.

Sherry Benton, the assistant district attorney, sat at the first table, her paralegal assistant with her. They quietly opened and closed files and whispered together.

Four other attorneys sat on either side of Rick. Six spectators sat behind them.

“We have three prelims,” Judge Clemmons said. “The first one is,” he squinted through his glasses, “the State versus Perry Snider. The second one, The State versus Luis Ortenz . . . Ortenza. The last one, The State versus Richard Black.” He looked up from the docket and removed his glasses. “Is everyone ready?”

A chorus of “Yes, sir” echoed. Judge Clemmons settled back.

“You may begin, Miz Benton.”

Miss Benton flicked her shoulder-length blond hair. She briefly adjusted her dress. Every man in the room would agree that she had outstanding legs and a cover-girl face. A real head-snapper, as they say, but as shallow as a salt pond.

She stood and pushed her hair away from her face, smiling at the judge, a studied example of Southern charm and beauty.

“Do you want me to go first, Your Honor?” she asked, her voice carrying a trace of a drawl.

“Yes, ma’am,” he said, beaming back.

Rick picked up his latest case notes and started reading. He put the case notes down when he heard Judge Clemmons set the bond in the first case.

“The State versus Luis Ortenza,” the clerk nearly shouted.

A deputy brought Luis through the holding-cell door. Rick motioned to the chair next to him, as he sat at the defendant’s table. Luis sat and tried to whisper to him, but Rick waved him off.

“How do you pronounce your name?” Judge Clemmons asked, pointing at Luis.

“Lew-ees Or-ten-zi-a.”

The judge leaned forward, scowling. “You get to your feet when you answer my questions, Mr.

Or-ten-zi-a. Do you understand?”

Rick nudged Luis, standing with him.

“Si, Your Honor.”

“You may go ahead, Miss Benton.”

“Thank you, sir.”

She outlined the case in short, terse sentences. Officer Parker saw the defendant’s car at 3:45 A.M. The officer observed the car speeding and the driver and car fit several drug courier profile characteristics: besides the speeding, it was a newer model rental, and it had Florida tags.

The Pooler police had broadcast an alert; a state officer had heard and responded. The backup officer was James Morrow, Georgia Bureau of Investigation. Both police officers were present in court and would testify to the facts outlined. She sat down.

“Mr. Speed, do you have any opening remarks?” Clemmons asked.

“No sir. I would like a full preliminary hearing with testimony from all officers involved, subject to cross- examination.”

“You’ll be permitted your cross, within reason and so long as it’s pertinent to the issues. But I’m not going allow a fishing expedition, Mr. Speed.” Clemmons looked at his court docket. “Are you appointed?”

“No, sir.”

“That’s unusual, isn’t it?”

“Not at all, Judge.” Rick stood again and held his gaze on the judge. He felt his anger rising-- just what Clemmons probably wanted. But he was tired of being put down. “I do have clientele that pay.”

Clemmons face flushed. “I didn’t mean that, Mr. Speed. I realize you have retained clients along with your court-appointed ones.” Clemmons shifted papers around on the bench, avoiding

Rick's eyes.

Rick felt a small thrill. He didn't get to embarrass Clemmons often.

The judge motioned toward Sherry Benton. "Let's proceed, ma'am. Call your first witness."

"I call Officer Rodney Parker," Miss Benton said, looking toward the jury box.

A young man stood up. His form-fitted uniform outlined a weightlifter's bulk, and his arms bulged from the ends of the short sleeves. His face was blocked, square and blunt, as if it had been carved from a tree trunk.

The clerk administered the oath. Benton pushed her hair back again. "Officer Parker, could you tell the court the events of the evening of last Monday?"

Parker cleared his throat and looked at a notebook in his hand. "I was on routine patrol near the intersection of Highway 80 and I-95 when I received a call. Dispatch told me to go to the city limits sign on I-95, northbound, and look out for a tan, 1993 Pontiac Lemans, with Florida, Dade County tags. It was a suspected drug vehicle.

"I observed the car traveling north at a high rate of speed. I stopped it. I identified the driver as . . ." he looked at the notebook again. "Luis Ortenzio . . . Ortenza."

"What did you do then?"

"I asked the driver to get out of the car. He did and I put him in the back seat of my car. Agent Morrow was assisting. He got permission to search the car, which we did."

"Did the defendant agree to the search?" she asked.

"Yes. He gave agent Morrow the keys."

"And did you conduct a search of the car?"

"Yes. I opened the trunk and found a plastic package containing white powder, believed to be cocaine. A field test was positive."

"Your witness," Benton said, billowing her skirt and sitting in her chair in one swoop.

Rick stood and adjusted his yellow pad on the table. "Speeding wasn't your primary probable cause, was it? What's the real reason you stopped the defendant?" Rick asked.

"Agent Morrow contacted me. Gave me a description of the car and asked me to call him if I saw it. But the defendant was speeding."

"Did Morrow tell you anything about why he wanted the car stopped?"

"He told me the driver was a mule."

"What did you find when you opened the trunk?"

"A large suitcase. It was locked, but there was a package wrapped in plastic and sealed with duct tape on the floor beside it." Parker snapped his notebook shut.

"Did you open the suitcase?" Rick asked.

"No."

"Was it ever opened?"

"Yes. I went to my cruiser to see if the defendant had a key for the suitcase. He didn't have one. I went back to his car. Agent Morrow had already opened it. It was empty."

"A key was needed to open it?"

"Yes sir. It had a hasp lock."

"Where was Morrow when you went to the cruiser?"

"He was standing next to the trunk of the suspect's car," Parker looked at Rick, then glanced at Morrow, and back to Rick.

"Were you facing the suspect's car when you were asking him for the key?" Rick asked.

"No. My back was to his car."

"Did you see Morrow open the suitcase?"

"No."

"How long were you with the suspect while Morrow was at the trunk?" Rick pressed.

Sherry Benton rose. "Your Honor, I object to this line of questioning. It's irrelevant, and I have no idea what Mr. Speed is getting at."

"Yes, I can't figure out what you're driving at either, Mr. Speed."

"I'm trying to establish the facts of the arrest, Your Honor."

"Go ahead. But I'm not going to let this go on forever." Clemmons adjusted himself in his seat.

"Thank you, Your Honor. Now, Officer Parker, you may answer my question."

Parker looked at the ceiling and wrinkled his forehead. "About three or four minutes, no more than that."

"Did you see Morrow take anything out of the trunk?"

"Your Honor . . ." Benton jumped to her feet.

"Okay, Mr. Speed. You've done all you're going to do with that line of questioning. Go on to something else," Clemmons said.

"Your Honor, it's important that I establish the quantity of cocaine that was in the trunk at the time of the arrest."

"One kilo, Mr. Speed." Judge Clemmons held up one finger, peering at him over his glasses. "Go on to something else."

"That's all for this witness."

Rick believed Parker. His answers were direct and to the point, and he wasn't evasive.

James Morrow sat in the witness chair and was sworn.

He testified along the same lines as Officer Parker, confirmed his contact with the police department and corroborated Parker's testimony concerning the events, emphasizing that the suitcase was empty when opened. Rick rose to cross-examine.

"Mr. Morrow, did you have the crime lab analyze the suitcase?"

“Yes.”

“What were the results?” Rick asked.

“Cocaine residue was present.”

“What was in it when you opened it? When Officer Parker was talking to the defendant?”

“It was empty.”

“Mr. Speed, you’re doing it again,” Clemmons said.

“Is it reasonable to believe that the suitcase contained cocaine sometime prior to your opening it?”

“Yes. About eighty percent pure.” Morrow smirked.

“Do you know the location of the cocaine now?”

“Yes.”

Judge Clemmons interrupted again. “Mr. Speed, where are we going with this? Both officers have already testified more than once that the suitcase was empty. Even I understand that it was empty. So, what’s the problem? Never mind,” he went on. “I find that there is sufficient probable cause upon which to base the arrest. The defendant is bound over for indictment.”

“I don’t have any more questions, Your Honor.”

“I know. What about bond?”

“We request the court not allow a bond,” Benton said.

For the first time since the hearing began, Clemmons frowned at her. “There’s no testimony that the defendant lives in this community. It’s apparent he has no ties with the community and therefore would be a risk for future appearances. Bond is set at fifty thousand property, one hundred thousand cash.” He smacked the gavel on the bench and called the next case.

Rick and Luis were hustled into the holding area by a deputy sheriff.

“Can you make a hundred grand?” Rick asked Luis.

Luis shrugged his shoulders. "Maybe in a couple of days."

"Let me know," Rick said as the deputy guided Luis through the holding-cell door.

After the door was locked again, the deputy let Rick back into the courtroom. As Rick walked out the rear door, he ran into Jesse Kinser coming down the hall.

As they walked Jesse asked him if he could do a couple of uncontested divorce hearings for him.

"I sure would like to, Jesse, but I got some things to do."

"Hey, no problem. Maybe next time," Kinser said.

Rick waved as Jesse rushed away. Kinser was good about giving him uncontested divorce hearings and then paying him twenty bucks a pop. Kinser's theory was to do the uncontested divorces real cheap; then the clients would come back with money for the important cases. His strategy must work, Rick thought. Kinser built a house in Micronesia in the South Pacific and was planning on retiring within a few years. Rick could learn something from him, probably. Hell, Kinser was only thirty-one.

Rounding a corner, Rick saw Parker and Morrow waiting at the elevator. They stood in silence. The elevator stopped, then all three got in, and it started to the ground floor.

As the elevator door started closing, Rick said, "My guy says there were forty keys of powder in the trunk. You guys going to retire soon?"

Morrow and Parker both looked at him.

"Bullshit!" Morrow said. He jabbed the emergency stop button on the elevator. It jarred to a halt.

Morrow pointed a finger at Rick. "Let me tell you something. You damned well better have some proof before you make claims. You screw around with me, and I'll take it personal."

"What's the matter, Morrow? Truth hurt?"

“Guys, guys, calm down. Let’s talk this out,” Parker said.

Morrow stepped forward and punched his finger onto Rick’s chest, pushing him back.

“Listen, fucker! I don’t rip off drugs. There was only one kilo in that car.”

Rick looked down at Morrow’s finger on his chest. Then he looked at

Morrow’s face, seeing his eyes up close and smelling his minty breath and at the same time brought his knee up hard into Morrow’s groin. Morrow doubled over with a grunt and fell to his knees. Rick jerked Morrow’s head back with a handful of hair.

“And I ain’t no bag man, asshole!” he shouted in Morrow’s face. “You didn’t have any proof on me, either, but that didn’t stop you from running your goddamned lies past the Grand Jury! But you better believe that if I can prove you took that shipment, I’m going to do it. I’m going to nail your ass.”

Morrow struggled to his feet. The elevator timer went off at the same time, ringing insistently. Parker grabbed Morrow. Rick pulled out the red stop button, and the elevator started down again.

Rick adjusted his tie and jacket and turned his back on Morrow. Blood was pounding in his ears so hard it seemed the elevator was throbbing. He was hyped up, feeling good after busting Morrow in the balls. He had waited a long time for that. He knew that two years before, he’d never have hit anyone, but Morrow deserved it.

“I’ll have your ass for assaulting a police officer,” Morrow gasped now, bent over at the waist and leaning on Parker.

“Go ahead. I was provoked.”

“Listen, guys, calm down,” Parker put in. “This can be settled without all that.”

Rick looked over his shoulder as the door opened on the first floor. “There isn’t anything to settle.”

Rick walked toward the door, a spring in his step. Morrow shambled out, limping, bent over at the waist, shrugging off Parker's hand.

Parker hurried and walked beside Rick. "There wasn't anything in the suitcase, Mr. Speed." His voice low.

"Morrow was alone at the trunk, and you had your back turned for four or five minutes, right? While you were trying to get the key from Luis, Morrow opened the trunk and threw the coke onto the side of the road, in the grass. Then, he went back later and got it." Rick punched his finger in the air for emphasis.

Parker shrugged. "Morrow did have the trunk open and the locks were popped when I came back. But I don't think he had time to dump anything."

Rick stopped and touched Parker on the arm. "Chief Deputy Wright says you're stand-up. I'll buy that for now, but Morrow's another thing. He's dirty, and I'm going to prove it."

"I don't think so, Mr. Speed. I know I wouldn't do it."

"Maybe you wouldn't, but as Morrow once said when I told him I was honest, 'Everyone's dishonest, it's just a matter of degree.'"

Rick looked over his shoulder, just as Morrow pushed open the hallway door leading to the Municipal Court office.

"That bastard's really going to take out a warrant," he said, not believing it, then cracking a smile.

CHAPTER 6

“Damn, Ramon. How much longer we got to go?” Earl Lee Cobb asked.

Ramon looked at him from under his pencil-thin eyebrows. “Not much, hombre.”

Earl Lee stretched and yawned. “Seems like we’ve been in this car forever.”

Ramon ran his hand through his thick, black hair.

Earl Lee slapped a drumbeat on his knees. “Hell, I didn’t even ride in a car until I was eighteen. They ain’t no roads in the Okeefeenokee. Just muskrat trails and alligators wallows.”

“Yeah. I know, you’re just a po-boy redneck from the swamps. Don’t know nothing, like us big-city Cubanos from Miami.”

Earl Lee changed the rhythm of his knee beat.

“Hey, did I ever tell you how all of them alligators got in the New York sewers?”

“You put them there, right?”

“No, but when I was a kid, I used to steal alligator eggs, hatch-um out and sell the little gators to the tourists. See, they carried them back to New York, put them in a tank. They’d get tired of them real fast and then flush them down the toilet.”

“And you sold them all, right?”

Earl Lee kept drumming his knees and looked out the window. “Most of them.”

“Get the map out, hombre,” Ramon said.

Earl Lee opened the glove box, moved the .38 Smith & Wesson and the Colt 45 aside and took out a map of the Eastern United States.

“What’cha need?” Earl Lee asked.

“Find Pooler.”

Earl Lee ran his finger along I-ninety-five. “Got it. A little north of the I-16 intersection.”

“We’re close then. About ten, fifteen minutes.”

“Hey, Ramon, can we eat when we get there? I’m hungry.”

“You’re always hungry.”

“Hell, buddy. I didn’t have nothing to eat ‘cept gators and rattlesnake till I came to Miami.”

Earl Lee gave him a buck toothed grin.

Ramon’s eyes went back to the road. He knew of two guys Earl Lee had whacked. One he caught pumping his latest squeeze, sneaked up behind them and put a six-inch stiletto through the back of the guy’s neck. The girl ran away screaming, drenched in her dead lover’s blood.

The other was a contract hit. The guy left his girlfriend’s house at three in the morning and Earl Lee stepped out of the bushes and popped the guy with a nine millimeter through the roof of his mouth, the guy being six two and Earl Lee only five foot five.

Earl Lee had balls. That’s why he worked for Ramon, just like Ramon worked for Hector Affianta. Mr. A expected results; Ramon got results. Earl Lee kept his mouth shut and did what he was told. Of course, the redneck routine got tiresome occasionally, but that was a small price to pay to have Earl Lee at your back.

Ten minutes later, they took the Pooler exit. They swung left on Highway 80, pulled into a Burger King and parked in the lot.

The road was bracketed with fast-food joints, gas stations, and a couple of motels.

They sat in the car while Earl Lee ate a Whopper, fries and a Coke. Ramon sipped black coffee, no sugar.

“What’re we doing up here, Ramon?” Earl Lee asked.

“Hector wants us to do a little job.”

Earl Lee waited. “Well, you gonna tell me, or I have to guess?”

“I’ll tell you when it’s time.”

Earl Lee shrugged and shut up.

They finished eating in ten minutes, then left the Burger King and drove across the highway to the Gate station. Earl Lee topped off the tank while Ramon flirted with the female attendant and paid for the gas. Ramon drove back across the road and parked at the Burger King again.

He shut off the engine and didn’t say anything for a long time; just watching the cars come and go.

Finally he moved, adjusting himself in the seat. “We’re looking for a cop. We gotta ask him some questions.”

Earl Lee yawned. “What’s his name?”

“Rodney Parker.”

“What answers do we want?”

Ramon told Earl Lee about Luis and the forty keys he was carrying to Toronto for Hector.

“But Mr. A’s lawyer, says this cop turned in one kilo,” Ramon said. “When Luis made his collect call, he says the cops ripped off the rest. We gotta find out if it’s so.”

“We can do that,” Earl Lee stated.

Ramon explained that Earl Lee would find out if Parker was on duty. A cop had to pull into the Burger King sooner or later and he would ask the first one that came along. The story would be that Earl Lee was a former cop from wherever. He wanted to talk to Parker, because a friend of his

knew Parker. When they found Parker, they'd play it by ear.

Ramon twitched his lips--his version of a smile. "Use that good-ole-boy shit on him."

Earl Lee grinned, looking comical with those buckteeth hanging out.

Ramon knew Earl Lee could get into playing a part, manipulating someone, and finding out information. Earl Lee always had fun. He really enjoyed his work.

At six-thirty a new Ford with Pooler Police in big blue letters on its doors stopped at the Burger King. A cop got out and went into the restaurant, ordered and sat near the front window. Earl Lee went in as Ramon watched from the car.

Earl Lee ordered and carried a cup to the cop's table. Ramon watched him grinning and talking, bobbing his head and scratching his crotch. The cop said something and Earl Lee sat across from him. They talked for nearly five minutes, and then Earl Lee stood up and pumped the cop's hand, all the time grinning and talking. Earl Lee disappeared into the bathroom and the cop cleaned the table and left.

As the taillights of the cop's car disappeared, Ramon watched Earl Lee amble back to the rented Town Car. Ramon could tell from his jaunty walk that he was happy. He did indeed like his work.

Earl Lee opened the door and slid in. "Officer Travis was mighty helpful. Parker ain't working tonight. He lives right up the street. Go outta here and turn left. About two blocks, on the left, will be a little white building; a barbecue place. Right next to it is a two-story green building. The bottom is some kind of store, and Parker lives upstairs."

* * *

Rodney Parker wasn't home. They parked in the barbecue store's parking lot, about a

hundred feet from the stairs leading to Parker's apartment.

Earl Lee went in the barbecue place and bought Cokes. They drank while they watched Parker's upstairs apartment.

Ten minutes later the people who ran the store started looking at them.

"Let's get out of here for a while," Ramon said. "We're attracting attention."

They pulled out of the parking lot and drove east on Highway 80, turned at the stoplight toward the airport, and found the Quality Inn. Earl Lee suggested they get a drink.

They went in, sat at the bar and ordered drinks. Ramon had one whiskey and water, with a twist. Earl Lee had three shots of Southern Comfort straight, over ice.

"Do we have a plan or what?" Earl Lee asked.

Ramon looked around the bar and thought about it.

"Pull the same bullshit on him as you did on the other cop. Get in the door, be real buddy-buddy like and ask some questions. Tell him that we're with Miami Vice, and we're investigating the other end of his drug bust."

Earl Lee chuckled. "Just like on TV."

Ramon face crinkled. "Just like on TV. You don't look like Don Johnson, but you'll do."

They drank and waited until eleven o'clock. Ramon had switched to Cokes, and Earl Lee turned to boilermakers.

Ramon was keeping sober and kept telling Earl Lee to lay off. He was no good to him if he was drunk.

Earl Lee explained that he wasn't drunk. He picked up his glass and put it to his lips.

Ramon stared, waiting. Earl Lee chugged his half full glass, then Ramon paid the bill and wouldn't talk to Earl Lee all the way back to Rodney Parker's apartment.

* * *

Ramon parked the car in dark shadows behind the building, hidden from the street.

A blue Ford pickup was parked at the bottom of the stairs, and lights were on in the upstairs apartment. The barbecue shop was closed.

Ramon and Earl Lee went up the stairs, Earl Lee in the lead. They stepped lightly and avoided making any noise.

Earl Lee knocked on the door, and Ramon looked over the railing at the parking lot below, making sure no one was around.

Rodney Parker opened the door. He was wearing cut-offs and a tank top. Sweat glistened on his shoulders. He wiped his face with a towel, and then gave Ramon and Earl Lee a quick look. "What can I do for you?" A TV blared in the background.

"I'm Earl Lee Cobb. We're looking for Rodney." Earl Lee leaned against the doorframe, right hand on his hip.

"That's me. What can I do for you?"

"Travis said I might find you at home. I know him from way back. This here's my friend Ramon." Earl Lee indicated Ramon over his shoulder. "Can we come in a minute?"

"Well," he paused. "I don't know. I'm working out and---"

"It'll only take a few minutes. See, Ramon and me are from Miami. Miami Vice. You know, like on TV." Earl Lee giggled.

Parker kept the screen door closed, his frown keeping distance between them. "Like on TV? What?" Parker said.

"It's a joke, man. A joke. You don't get it? See we're on the Vice Squad in Miami. Miami Vice, get it?"

Ramon stepped forward. "Mr. Parker, you got a perp last Monday on the Interstate carrying cocaine. We're working the other end in Miami and need some information. The reports just don't cut it."

"You got some identification?" Parker asked, leaving the screen door closed.

Earl Lee kept smiling. "Hey, what's the matter, buddy? Here, you want identification, you got it." He reached toward his back pocket.

Earl Lee whipped the Colt 45 out of his belt behind his back and pointed it in Parker's direction. "Now, how about you just move on back, boy." The smiles and joking vanished, and he jerked the door open. "We just got a few questions."

Parker stepped back from the door, raising his hands and quickly looking around the room.

Earl Lee and Ramon came through the door, and Earl Lee pushed Parker into an armchair in front of a couch. Parker sat heavily, hands still in the air.

Earl Lee went on as he sat on the arm of a chair opposite Parker. "The guy you busted was supposed to be carrying forty keys of coke. You only found one key?"

"That's right." Parker plastered a frown on his face. "His lawyer told me the same thing in court today."

Ramon stood behind Parker, looking at a picture of a girl of about twenty on top of the TV. "Wasn't there was another cop with you on the bust."

"Agent Morrow, he's with the GBI." Parker swallowed and lost some of the frown.

"You think he coulda took the snow?" Earl Lee asked, waving the barrel of the gun in Parker's direction.

Parkers' eyes followed the gun. "There was only one kilo. It was lying in the open in the trunk. We impounded a suitcase, but it was empty."

"Well, see, we'd like to know where the other thirty-nine keys are." Earl Lee tilted his head at

Parker, a tiny smile emerging across his face.

Parker licked his lips. "Maybe Ortenza took it."

Earl Lee kept a distance between them and moved around the end of the couch. "Maybe."

The one word hung in the air, casting doubt on everything Parker was saying.

"I swear guys, I didn't take anything." Parker wiped a trickle of sweat from over his right eye.

Ramon got up and looked around, then turned the volume on the TV a little louder. He kept rambling, through a door into an adjoining room. Earl Lee kept asking Parker questions about Morrow and going over what happened to the cocaine again. Earl Lee kept the pistol pointed at Parker. Parker was shaking his head and saying that the only cocaine he saw was the one key.

Ramon came back into the room. "Put these on, hombre." He threw a pair of handcuffs to Parker.

Earl Lee kept the snout of the black gun aimed on Parker's chest.

Parker slipped the cuffs around his left wrist and left the other cuff dangling. Ramon moved behind him, pulled his arms around and started to cuff the other wrist behind his back when Parker whirled, grabbed Ramon around the waist and wrestled behind him. Ramon shoved backward, and he and Parker sprawled on the floor, Ramon on top. Earl Lee jumped on Parker and pushed the gun in his face, just below his left cheekbone. "I'll blow your head off, fucker!" Earl Lee said quietly.

Ramon snapped the cuff on Parker's other wrist, and they hauled him into a chair in front of the couch. The TV still blared.

"I told you. I didn't take any dope." Parker breathed heavily, the air giving a quiet whistle as it was sucked in his nose. "I stopped the car. I put the guy in my car. I didn't take any dope, and Morrow didn't take it, either. There was only one kilo."

"What'd you see in the trunk?" Ramon asked.

“Only the one package and the suitcase.”

“Where does Morrow live?” Earl Lee asked.

“Somewhere in Savannah, I think. We’ve made a couple of busts together, but we don’t socialize.”

“How did you know to stop the guy?” Ramon asked.

“Morrow called in and posted a lookout. Make of the car and everything. He said the GBI got an anonymous tip.” Parker hunched forward in the chair.

Ramon kept grilling Parker, going over the arrest, from the initial stop, up to the time Parker had taken Luis to the county jail.

“Well,” Earl Lee said. “This guy Morrow might have ditched the stuff while you was patting Luis down and putting him in the car. Then he could of come back later and picked it up.”

Hope flashed across Parker’s face. “It was dark. If he’d thrown it on the shoulder, I probably wouldn’t have seen it. I’m being straight with you.”

“What do you think, Ramon?” Earl Lee asked.

“This asshole’s too chicken-shit for a rip off. Look at him, he’s gonna piss his pants.”

“I need a beer.” Earl Lee watched Parkers’ arms shaking as if he were chilled.

Earl Lee moved toward the kitchen, then one step beyond Parker, he turned, put the gun barrel against Parker’s head and pulled the trigger. The noise boomed off the walls. Blood and brains sprayed the arm of the chair and hung, dripping off the lampshade. Parker’s body thumped onto the floor. His legs twitched once, then he was still.

Ramon jumped at the same time the gun went off. “Jesus Christ, Earl Lee!”

“Hell, he didn’t know shit. I sure as hell don’t want his buddies coming after us. Let’s go.”

“Turn out the light. Have a look outside,” Ramon said.

Earl Lee flipped the light switch. He opened the door and surveyed the empty parking lot,

then checked for people walking by. The street was clear.

They padded down the stairs, got into the car, and drove across the grass behind the building, onto a dirt street and behind the volunteer fire station. Only then did Ramon turn on the headlights. Picking up speed, they pulled onto the street and headed toward Interstate 95.

“What now?” Earl Lee asked. “Go find this Morrow guy?”

“I don’t think so. I don’t see anyone throwing forty keys into the grass and picking it up later.”

“So, where’s the snow, then?”

“I think Luis stashed it before he got stopped. Hector won’t like that.”

* * *

Twenty minutes later they drove around the deserted squares onto Bay Street and found the Hyatt Hotel by accident. They checked into a room and Ramon dialed Miami.

* * *

A phone in a deserted warehouse rang once. The call was shunted to a cellular hookup, and then transferred to the phone sitting on the desk next to Hector Affianta in his Miami Beach home.

“Pronto,” Hector said.

“The Man didn’t have it. I think the messenger took it,” Ramon said.

“Are you in a nest?”

“Yes. My name’s James Winston. You want me to wait?”

“Si. Lay back awhile, I’ll be in touch.”

Ramon hung up the phone as Earl Lee came out of the bathroom. “We got a few days’ vacation, hombre.”

“Good. I can work on my tan.” Earl Lee grinned, skinning up his shirtsleeve, showing his bony, white arm.

CHAPTER 7

Two and a half hours back to Jacksonville in the rental car and two and a half back in the ‘86 Cadillac. Constanzia was stiff, irritable and her butt was numb, as she eased off I-95 onto the I-16 exit lane, toward Savannah.

It didn’t take much to find the storage unit. The white Cadillac was inside, clean, with a full tank. All she had was the ignition key and she wondered why Luis hadn’t given her the trunk key

too. Playing Mr. Secret, being cool.

“I sure hope it’s worth it.” She looked in the mirror and checked her lipstick. Coming off the I-16 ramp onto Montgomery Street, she recognized the jail on her left, went around the square in the middle of the street a block down, and screeched to a stop at the light on Bay Street.

She’d be glad to get back to her room. Get a shower and a change of clothes. Maybe a sandwich, then some sleep. Tomorrow, she’d see Luis, then get the money.

* * *

She pulled the curtains open and jumped back. A container ship filled the window overlooking the Savannah River. The ship seemed so close, she could almost reach out and touch it, but it was still two hundred feet away, in the middle of the Savannah River. She stepped through the sliding doors onto the balcony to watch it, pushing up the river against the outgoing tide, easing past her window and the fronts of the stores and offices lining River Street. People on the street below were stopping and staring, mouths open, or pointing, hollering at their kids to look at the big ship. She could almost hear them, “Gee, Martha, that big ship, right here in town! You believe that? Wait till I tell Elmer.” Back somewhere in Littleburg, Nebraska.

She stepped back inside, leaving the curtains open and dousing the lights. Stifling a yawn, she leaned over the dresser and tapped white crystals from a glass vial. She rummaged around in her purse until she found a razor blade, then she chopped the crystals until they turned to dust. With a twenty she rolled into a straw she snorted two lines, the snow disappearing. She pinched her nose, rubbed her face, then wet a finger and cleaned the dresser top, rubbing her gums with the excess. She’d have to quit this shit someday. Someone once mentioned a guy whose gums rotted from too much coke, then his teeth fell out. Someone else had told her it dissolved the cartilage in

your nose, and then it would fall off. She could quit anytime; she just wasn't ready yet. Besides, it was free.

She lay back on the bed, kicked off her shoes and watched the ship slide past the window. She felt the euphoria creep into her bones and muscle, everything going loose and spongy. Maybe she'd just forget the something to eat.

* * *

Constanzia rolled over. The sky was cloudless and pale blue and the early morning sun blasted through the window. She sat up. River and marsh grass filled the window, stretching to the horizon. She decided to eat breakfast and then see Luis.

Maybe she shouldn't have come with him. If Hector found out, he'd probably kill them both. But Hector wouldn't find out, and there was no use getting second thoughts now. Don't let the paranoia win, she told herself.

She had been careful. She wanted to play this out with Luis. He made good on his claim that he could put his hands on enough money to keep her happy, and that had surprised her. She figured the trip as a vacation. Have some fun, a change of pace. She figured he was just blowing, using big talk about big money as his come on, but then he showered the money on her in the motel. Then he and the money were gone. He still had it somewhere. She just couldn't tie in his getting arrested and put in jail. It almost seemed as if he had planned it that way.

She picked up the phone and dialed Rosie's number and left her number when the machine beeped.

Constanzia was eating the room-service breakfast when the phone rang. She hesitated for a second, and then picked it up. "Pronto."

“Constanzia. How are you?” her sister asked.

“I’m fine, baby. Did Hector call?”

“He left a message on the recorder last night around nine, wants you to call.”

“Gracias, Cara. Talk to you later. Bye.” She hung up.

After her eggs Benedict and the last piece of toast disappeared, she dialed Hector’s home in Miami Beach. They opened with some talk about her vacation, and then he asked when she planned to return to Miami. She told him by Friday, at the latest.

“Something has happened,” he said. “Luis is in jail.”

“Oh.” She tried not to appear obviously unconcerned, or overly cautious. She felt her pulse pick up a little.

“Si. He was stopped in Georgia.”

“Well, do you need me back?”

He hesitated. “Call me back on the private line.”

She had a creepy-crawly feeling that Hector knew everything, shivered, then reassured herself there was no way.

She dialed the private number.

He didn’t even bother with a hello. “The problem is that it’s not going to snow in Toronto.”

Her heart quickened its pace. “The skiers are going to be mad.” Then thought she must sound stupid, making such an obvious statement.

“Not only the skiers. Unless it snows soon, I’m going to lose a lot of money. The ‘window of opportunity’ as the gringos say, will be closed.”

“These things happen.”

Hector let out a sigh. “Only once Cara. Only once.”

“Do you need me to do anything?” She tried to keep her voice calm, to suppress the nervous jangle just below the surface.

“Si. You go to Savannah. See Luis. Tell him I sent you. We’re concerned about him. Ease his mind.”

“Sure. I’ll go tomorrow.”

“Drive to Miami tonight. You can catch a flight out of here tomorrow. We can spend some time together.”

Constanzia quietly took a deep breath. “I’d rather fly out of Plantation Key and catch a connection. Spend a little more time with Rosie. I’ll let you know if I have a layover. If I do, we’ll have supper together.” She made her voice cheerful.

He was quiet a moment. She coughed, and then held her breath. Finally he moved. “OK, see what you can do. Keep in touch.”

She set the phone down, breathed a sigh of relief and scrubbed her head vigorously, throwing her long black hair back. Her scalp crawled, and she scrubbed harder. She’d call him tomorrow around noon and say she’d arrived in Savannah and would be on her way to see Luis.

This was getting scary. Hector might have checked with his seers, listening to their mumbo-jumbo voodoo bullshit. Or maybe he just felt something was wrong. Then again, maybe she was just paranoid when it came to Hector.

* * *

After a shower and after she had calmed herself, she slipped into a black sheath dress, then finished by putting on bright red lipstick and gray eye shadow. Fluffing her hair, she locked the door on her way to the jail.

Luis sat on the stool behind the glass. “Did you get the car?”

“Of course. But Hector called. He’s upset.”

“What did you tell him?”

“Nothing.”

He stared at her through the glass.

“I didn’t tell him anything.” She emphasized her statement, her voice rising in pitch and her hand fluttering.

“I want you to get a key from under the front fender of the Cadillac, near the left headlight.” Luis checked to see if anyone was listening. “It’s in one of those little magnetic boxes. Take it and get the bag out of the trunk of the car.”

“OK. What then?”

“The money’s in the bag. All ours.” He kept her stare. “All ours.”

Suddenly her mouth went dry, and her pulse quickened. The room started swimming, and she felt like she was going to throw up. “Did you sell Hector’s snow?” She watched his face.

“I didn’t sell anything that belonged to Hector.” His eyes staring directly at her.

“How much were you delivering?”

“Nada. I wasn’t delivering anything.”

“Hector says you were. Says that the skiers in Toronto are gonna be pissed off.” She paused, biting at a fingernail, keeping her eyes on his eyes, calming herself by taking deeper breaths.

He waved his hand at her and sat back on the stool, then started looking at the ceiling, the walls, the floor; everywhere but at her.

She leaned forward and whispered through the grill as she watched her hands tremble.

“How much did you rip off?”

Luis shrugged. “He won’t find out. He’ll think the cops took the snow. He won’t even

suspect.”

“Mierda! I can’t believe this! You think I want to get killed?” she whispered loudly, leaning closer to the grill.

“Keep your voice down.” He looked around and hunched forward, shushing her by waving his hands.

Constanzia sat up straighter, becoming resigned to what she was hearing. “That’s where the money came from. You found a buyer. You sold Hector’s shipment.”

He scooted close to the grill again. “It’s not important. You get the key, like I said. You open the trunk; take a hundred grand to Rick Speed, the lawyer. Tell him to post my bond. I’ll get out, and we’re gone. Six hundred grand, all ours. You like that?” He motioned to her, asking her to agree with him with his body language.

“You must be crazy. If Hector even suspects, we’re both dead.” She was so scared she thought she might wet her pants.

“He won’t! As far as anyone knows, the cops took the snow. I told my lawyer. It’ll get around, the cops ripped off the shipment, turned in one key to get me busted and stashed the rest. Cops do that all the time. Besides, after we’re gone, no one will find us.” He sat back. “I got plans, baby. No one is ever going to find us. We’re gonna disappear and live like kings.” He was smiling now, looking confident. “I got a guy in New York who can get me genuine passports in any name we want. We’ll just drop off the face of the earth. Start living anywhere we want, living a new life.”

She bit another nail, running the scenario through her mind like flipping cardboard pictures. She was not entirely sure he was cool enough to rip Hector off and survive. She knew she wasn’t. But she didn’t have a choice, yet. So she said, “Anywhere except Miami. Better yet, anywhere except the U.S.”

“Fuck the U.S. of A. There’s plenty other places to live in style.”

“OK, I’ll get it done.” She could see him getting his cockiness back now, showing her he was in control.

Luis slipped a white business card through the slot at the bottom of the grill. She took it and read Richard Speed’s name, phone number and address.

He stood and gave a little wave. “Soon, Cara. Soon. We’ll be on our way to Paradisio.”

CHAPTER 8

“Bad news, Rick,” Chief Deputy Norman Wright’s voice came over the phone Rick held to his ear.

Rick looked at the clock on his office wall. Nine-thirty. It was too early for bad news. He should have known though. The sky was overcast this morning, keeping the sulfur smell of Union Camp’s paper mill mantling the city. This beautiful city of notable southern heritage scarred and marked with the obnoxious smell of compromise. The houses and streets are kept beautiful and the downtown Historic District is preserved -- with a passion. Property owners have to get pre-approval to change the color of the buildings and streets are maintained with original brick and stones when possible. Azaleas and dogwood are planted, pruned and fertilized to ensure the city is a gem for the tourists and residents to admire and enjoy. The city is a showplace, and each year thousands come to experience the reality of American history preserved.

The mill is two miles west of the district.

The city is written about in magazines and books, but the paper mill and its permeating, disgusting smell are never mentioned. The employment and paychecks it provides buys the compromise. We have a beautiful city, the residents say. Come and see it, but ignore the factory and the smell because we need the money. Rick shifted his mind back to the phone.

“Shit, Norm, it’s awfully early in the morning.”

“Morrow got a warrant for you. Misdemeanor. Simple battery.”

“Let’s say we had a difference of opinion.”

“Judge Billing will release you on your own recognizance.”

“I’ll get Billy to represent me. Want him to call you?”

“Just have someone come pick up your copy. Keep me posted. . . and Rick,” Norman paused.
“Use your head.”

* * *

At six-thirty the same evening, Rick heard the front door of his office open.

He had worked all day on the five files on his desk, except for a quick sandwich and a glass of iced tea at Debbie's Restaurant on State Street just after 11:00 A.M. He had written five letters in longhand, along with instructions to his twenty-hour a week secretary, Marie. She would type them later. He called the clients to keep them happy, letting them all know he was on the job and they were the most important people in the world. He did all this through a haze of dull pain behind his eyes and with a metallic taste in his mouth. The smell from Union Camp hadn't helped, but he stuck with it. The prospect of a break; a new client, or maybe Billy, or even someone just asking directions was welcome.

"Come on back," he shouted, loud enough to be heard up front.

Footsteps stopped at his door and he looked up to see James Morrow. It took a second to register.

Finally he asked, "What do you want?" Then without waiting for a reply saying, "I'm busy." He leafed through the files on his desk.

Morrow sat in a chair. "I want to talk to you."

"Screw you and the horse you came in on. I don't have anything to talk to you about. Norman already called me about the warrant. It's been taken care of."

"This is important."

"To who?" Rick asked.

"To you . . . and me."

"Where's your backup?"

“I don’t have any backup. This is a private conversation. I’m not here pushing my badge. I just want to talk a minute.”

Rick looked at the clock on the wall. “You got two minutes.”

“Parker’s been murdered. Last night someone blew his head off.”

Rick sat back, getting a disoriented feeling. After being the subject of a criminal investigation, he had no interest in watching the news. His problems were enough to worry about, let alone those of the rest of the world.

“No leads, so far.” Morrow pulled his notebook from an inside pocket and flipped a few pages. “There was no forced entry; he was handcuffed and shot. At home.”

“Maybe the owners of the dope came around. I guess y’all shouldn’t have ripped them off, huh? Not feeling guilty, are you? Cause you got the rookie killed?”

“You son of a bitch,” Morrow yelled as he jumped up and grabbed Rick by the front of his shirt, arching over the desk between them, dragging him from his seat and across the desktop.

Rick was momentarily surprised, but recovered quickly, lashing out with his fist, smashing Morrow just above the left eye. Morrow fell back, crashed over a chair and sprawled on the floor. Rick jumped headlong over the desk and landed on top of him. He smashed Morrow’s face again, aiming for his mouth. Papers, files, staplers and books toppled from the desk, scattering across the floor and getting under Rick’s feet as he struggled to get up.

“Come on, asshole,” Rick growled, baiting Morrow, who was breathing hard and getting to his knees.

Morrow held his hand up, palms out. “OK. OK.” He breath coming in ragged gasps. “Truce. Let’s talk.”

“Keep your hands off!” Rick shouted.

“OK, OK,” Morrow said, his hands still held out.

Rick got up and walked past Morrow and into the bathroom. He put a wet paper towel on his face and went back to his desk. Morrow, seated in front of the desk, dabbed at his face with a handkerchief.

Rick glared at Morrow. "Well, what?" Rick asked.

"Nothing was taken. He had a hundred and ten bucks in his wallet." Morrow was getting his breath back now.

"You're wasting my time." Rick bent over and started picking up files.

"All right. You think I took the coke?"

"If the shoe fits . . ."

Morrow leaned forward. "You know that's bullshit, Speed. What's in it for you, pushing that idea around? Hell, I could see where you were going in court, trying to lay it on me. You can't get your guy off with that crap!"

"I don't care about my guy." Rick stared straight into Morrow's eyes. Then Rick rubbed his eyes. "I'm going to nail your ass just like you tried to nail mine."

"Great." Morrow sighed. "In the meantime I'm going to talk to your client. He might give me a lead."

"Without his attorney present?"

"I'm telling you, aren't I? I could've just gone directly to the jail! I didn't have to tell you."

"So why did you come?"

"Maybe he can tell me something, anything, even if it's unimportant. Something that might help find out who chopped Parker."

"I doubt it. Besides, you go for appearances, not truth." Rick patted his cheek with the towel. "If my client told you the truth, you wouldn't recognize it. Besides, he says you took the coke off him."

Morrow let out a sigh and looked at the ceiling. "OK. So maybe I was wrong. Judge Sims was the crook, and you weren't, OK?"

Rick scowled around the paper towel he held to his face. "Is this an apology?"

"Not for doing my job," Morrow snapped.

"I didn't think so, asshole."

"Quit calling me that," Morrow raised his voice and dabbed his eyebrow with his handkerchief.

Rick felt around his face. It hurt like hell. He didn't owe Morrow anything. If not for him, his life wouldn't be in the toilet. He owed Morrow some payback. He didn't know if Parker and Morrow were in this thing together or not. But, if Parker got whacked because of it, something was wrong. On the other hand, Morrow could conduct an interview of his client in an ongoing investigation whenever he wanted, with or without his permission. Of course, he couldn't use what he found out as evidence. He thought, he might as well be present to protect his client.

"OK," Morrow finally said. "I'm apologizing. Not for doing my job," he added hurriedly. "But I could have been more careful."

Rick let out a huge breath.

He looked Morrow straight in the eyes. "I did not have any part in the bribery, if there was one. I was clean. Just so things stay straight between us. I still don't give a shit what you think about it."

"Same here. But I do want to catch Parker's killer."

"I'll call Billy Thompson, then we'll talk to Luis." Rick reached for the phone. "But I'm not going to let you bulldog him. No rough stuff. No intimidation. Just questions. You got it?"

"He's got to have connections. If there were forty keys, you can bet he was connected. And for the last time, I didn't take the dope."

Rick hated to admit it, but although he probably knew it all along and was just hoping . . . Morrow probably didn't take the dope. It was hard to let it go. Of course, Rick though hopefully, he could be conning me.

* * *

Fifteen minutes later Morrow leaned over the vinyl-topped table and stuck his face nose to nose with Luis. "Don't jerk my chain. I'm not stupid. A bush-league mule like you couldn't be shipping forty keys of coke. Who's your supplier?"

"I don't work for nobody." Luis looked at Rick, questions in his eyes. "What's this about?"

"The Pooler cop who arrested you was killed. Handcuffed and shot in the head. Whoever did it left money in his wallet, so it wasn't robbery. He,"--Rick pointed at Morrow--"thinks it was a hit. He thinks your man believed your story about them taking it. They went to Parker, he couldn't tell them where it was, so they whacked him." Rick shrugged.

Luis looked at Morrow. "You shouldn't have ripped off the Snowman." Then his face cracked into a snide smile.

"Who's the Snowman?"

Luis's eyes took on a vacant stare. "I don't know nothing."

Morrow looked at Rick, then back. "Even if I cut you some slack? Put in a good word?"

Luis looked at Morrow, then Rick. "Do I have to answer his questions?"

"No. But whatever you say can't be used. He didn't Mirandize you before he started. You can say whatever you want, or say nothing."

Luis nodded, shook out a cigarette, lighted it, and watched the smoke curl to the ceiling.

“Then I got nothing to say.”

Morrow pointed his finger. “You’re going away, buddy, for a long time, and I’m going to try my best to see you get the deluxe vacation.”

Luis stood up. Squinting against the smoke curling around his face, he gave a faint smile.

“Thanks, I need one.”

CHAPTER 9

Constanzia returned to her hotel room fifteen minutes after leaving Luis, took a hit of coke and slept. The next morning she took a shower, cleared her head and sat down to think. She knew Hector wasn't as stupid as Luis thought. He would find out, and when he did, they would die.

She nervously fluffed the pillows and leaned against the headboard. She had to make some important decisions--decisions that could save her live.

The TV provided background company to her thoughts. Someone blabbering about approved colors of paint to be used on houses during downtown renovation. The talking so insignificant that it helped her focus her thoughts.

As far as Hector knew, she had done what she was told. Did he suspect Luis? Hard to tell, with Hector. If she got the money from Luis and gave it back to him, would he kill her anyway? Again, hard to tell.

Another option was take the money and run. Leave Luis on his own and just disappear. But Hector would never quit looking for her, and she didn't have the connections to get the passport. A passport in her own name would be a thread leading to her, and Hector would follow it. She'd need Luis if she ran.

She could stay in the US and wouldn't need Luis, but where? Certainly not in some po-dunk little town dying of boredom. Not New York, Miami, or Los Angeles. Hector would find her in those places, eventually. Chicago's too cold. Forget the Caribbean, Central or South America, that'd be like trying to live with the lion and not be eaten. That left Europe or Asia. Not Asia. Europe then. She'd still need Luis and his passport connections, no way around it.

That left the other option. Get Luis out on bond and skip with the money and him.

She picked up the card Luis had given her and read it. Speed's office was on Jefferson Street, wherever that was. Richard J. Speed, III, Attorney at Law.

She'd give him a call and see what happened.

She dialed and got his answering machine. When the machine beeped, she left her name and number, saying, "I'm a friend of Luis Ortenzia's. I'm trying to get his bond posted. Please call me."

She hung up and kicked off her shoes, grabbed the remote control and turned the television sound up. They were still talking about historically correct architectural integrity, whatever that was.

She surfed through the channels. The television screen blinked and she saw the portrait of a man in a cop uniform staring at her.

The unseen television commentator was talking. ". . . Rodney Parker was found dead in his apartment in Pooler, Georgia."

Behind the commentator, police cars with blue lights flashing accented a yellow tape surrounding a stairway attached to a two-story building.

"So far, the police have no suspects," the commentator continued. "Police sources state that Officer Parker was involved in the investigation of several cases, one most recently involving the seizure of a kilo of cocaine on Interstate Ninety-five which resulted in the arrest of Luis Ortenza,

who is awaiting trial on drug charges.”

A mug shot of Luis flashed on the screen.

“Officer Parker had served on the Police Department for thirteen months. More details at eleven. This is Rusty Dinnan, Channel 11 News.”

Constanzia hit the mute button as the screen switched to the studio commentator.

Hector knew!

She paced back and forth in front of the television, rubbing her hands, smoothing her hair and barely breathing.

Did he know, for sure? No doubt about it.

She made up her mind. It was easy, choosing herself over Luis; he wasn't even a second thought. She'd deal with Hector and get the money back to him. Tell him she tricked Luis into thinking she'd run away with him, just to get the money. That was the only way. She didn't want to end up like the cop. She shivered, just thinking about it: Hector, Ramon, or worse yet, Earl Lee, putting a gun to her temple and then nothing. She wouldn't even hear the loud noise ushering her to hell.

With trembling hands, she tapped cocaine from her vial and chopped a few lines. She spilled a little on the floor, wet her finger and picked it up.

The phone rang. She jumped. Heart thumping, she licked her lips and picked up the phone. “Pronto?” She was fighting to keep her voice calm.

“This is Richard Speed. I'm returning Ms. Salazar's call.”

She let out her breath. “I wanted to talk to you about Luis.”

“You need to talk to Billy Thompson. He's Luis's attorney. I work for him sometimes. Do you want his number?”

“Let me get a pen.”

Rick gave her the number. She thanked him, hung up the phone, and blew out a long breath.

Thompson's name sounded familiar. She tried to remember why. Suddenly it came to her. She had heard Hector mention his name when Vickie had been arrested in Brunswick the year before--if he was the same Billy Thompson.

An idea surfaced. She might be able to get herself out of this mess, after all. She would talk to Thompson and see if he was willing to smooth things over with Hector. If he would do that, she would get the money and hand it over. Maybe he could make things right. Maybe.

She knew she couldn't approach Hector directly; she couldn't guarantee what he'd do. She needed somebody to pave the way. Thompson would do, she decided. She remembered the name from several phone calls during the time of Vickie's arrest. Hector had been mad about losing the cocaine she was carrying and bitched about having to pay Thompson fifteen thousand, but he paid, posted her bond, and got her out of the country.

Hector had two or three attorneys working towns up and down I-95. They got the mules out on bond when they were arrested or plea-bargained with the district attorneys.

She felt a little relieved from having made the decision, as she picked up the phone.

Billy Thompson's secretary answered on the third ring and transferred the call.

"Mr. Thompson. I'm a friend of Hector Affianta's. I need to see you as soon as possible."

"I can see you in thirty minutes. Don't say anything else on the phone. We'll talk when you get here." He went on to explain how to get to his office.

* * *

Forty-five minutes later, Constanzia settled herself in the dark blue leather chair in front of

Billy Thompson. He sat behind his polished walnut desk, stacked with files and papers. The overhead rail lights glinted off the framed certificates and pictures covering the wall. Baby spots showed Billy Thompson shaking hands with various men in suits and ties.

“I need someone to represent me in a delicate matter.” Her eyes came back to his face.

“Tell me about it,” Billy replied, clearing himself a work place and reaching for a yellow pad.

“I’m a friend of Luis Ortenza’s. He works for Hector Affianta. You know Hector, right?”

“I’ve represented Mr. Affianta.”

“Right.” She placed a black purse on the chair next to her. “I have some money that belongs to Hector. I want him to know that I got the money back. If not for me, it would have been gone. He must know that!”

“Go on.” Billy twisted in his chair and straightened his tie.

“Can you do it?”

“I need to know more about your situation before deciding whether or not I can represent you. There may be a conflict of interest. I have represented Mr. Affianta in the past and I represent Mr. Ortenza now. Mr. Affianta has retained me on that case, also.”

She took a deep breath, and told him part of the story, leaving out her involvement with Luis but implying that Luis had stolen the money and she had gotten it back because he was hot for her and trusted her.

While she talked, Billy watched, but didn’t interrupt. When she finished, he went to the bar across the room and mixed himself a Maker’s Mark with water and got her a Coke.

“It’s not illegal to return money to its rightful owner,” he said, like he was thinking it over. He was quiet a moment then took a sip of his drink and looked at her.

“My fee will be twenty thousand dollars. I need ten thousand up front, with another ten when the job’s done.”

She bit her bottom lip. "I don't have much choice. I'll bring the ten thousand. When?"

"You can get it now. I'll wait. Unless you want me to come with you?"

She didn't hesitate. "I'll be back in thirty minutes. You make the call."

"Uh, excuse me." He adjusted a legal pad on his desk. "Do you have Hector's money now?"

"Why?"

"If you do, you may as well bring it with you. Then I can tell Hector that I have the money in hand."

"I don't know."

"It's your choice. I can either tell Hector what you've told me; but of course, I would have to tell him that I don't know the level of your sincerity or your ability to get the cash. On the other hand, if the money is safely in my possession, I can be very positive when I talk with him. I think it's better for you that way."

She looked at him. He sounded reasonable. If Hector trusted him, who was she to doubt him. He was Hector's attorney. He could get her out of this situation, if anyone could.

"I can represent your interests better if I have the cash." Giving her another reason. "There'd be no question of your ability or sincerity."

She made her decision. "I'll bring the money."

Billy nodded. "I think that's best."

* * *

She was back in thirty minutes, lugging a blue gym bag with YMCA in large white letters stamped on it. She let it fall beside his desk with a thump. She tossed a packet of money across

the desk. He flipped through the bills, and then laid them aside. He set the gym bag on his desk and unzipped it.

“How much?” he asked.

“I don’t know exactly. Over seven hundred thousand though.”

She sat in the chair. “Did you call Hector?”

He zipped the bag and dropped it on the floor. “Tonight” he said, his eyes still on the bag.

“Good. After you talk to him, call me at this number.”

He took the slip of paper she offered. “I’ll call you as soon as I talk to him.”

He guided her, gently nudging her to the door, talking quietly, assuring her that he would do the job. He would call Hector right away. He knew everything would work out.

“I’ll be at the hotel. You gonna give me a receipt?”

“You got to be kidding.” He snorted a small laugh.

“I’m not kidding.”

He looked at her and thought a second. “No receipt. Were it to be known that I was handling money that I’m pretty sure is from an illegal transaction . . . well, let’s just say it may be ethically marginal. You either trust me with this or you don’t. If not, take the money with you now. If you leave it, I’ll do my best with Hector for you. If you take it, I’ll call Hector and tell him what’s happened. I have to protect myself, even at your expense.”

She hesitated, running one or two different scenarios. “Call me as soon as you talk to Hector.”

“Right.” He nudged her to the door again, and then locked it behind her.

He went back to his office and opened the gym bag. He riffled through the stacks of bills and picked up the phone with his other hand. He took his eyes off the money just long enough to punch the area code for Atlantic City and seven numbers.

“Yeah,” a familiar voice said.

“This is Thompson.”

“Good to hear from you. I was getting worried.”

“I believe I owe ninety thousand, right?” he asked, thumbing through the packages of tightly bound bills.

“Just a minute.” He heard the pecking and clacking noise of a mechanical calculator.

“Ninety-one-five to be exact. That’s with the vig up to tomorrow midnight, it’s eighteen hundred a day, you know. How much you got?”

“All of it.”

“All of it?”

“Sure, why do you sound surprised?” He ran the zipper closed with a flourish.

“When are you gonna deliver?”

“Monday.”

“That’ll be another thirty-six hundred on top.”

“That’s not a problem.”

“The interest keeps running.”

“I know.”

After he replaced the phone, he knew his problems were over. All he had to do now was call Hector.

CHAPTER 10

Constanzia hadn't slept well Friday night. Billy Thompson's call never came. She kept calling him, but only reached the bubble-gum-snapping girl at the answering service who always said she'd give him the message. Finally she gave up, took a hit of coke and dozed off watching TV.

When she opened her eyes again, it was late Saturday morning. She had ordered breakfast. Now that it was in front of her, she wasn't hungry.

As she turned over the pancakes and wrinkled her nose, the phone rang. There was a beat of silence on the other end, then his voice, deep and ominous.

"You didn't call me from the airport." He said it like an accusation.

Her heart jumped to her throat. Caught off guard, she paused, trying to collect her thoughts. "I didn't have time." He must know she was lying.

"The lawyer called."

"Si. I told him to call you. Let you know." She rushed, interrupting him.

"It sounds like the snow's all melted. Is that true?" He spoke slowly.

"Si. But I've got a cash refund."

"I understand. The lawyer called me." Hector paused. "You stay put. I'll be in touch."

“OK.” She took a deep breath.

She let the air out as he hung up. Her knees were trembling. Did he sound pleased? She thought so. A little suspicious, maybe, but definitely pleased. She rubbed her damp hands together and took another deep breath. She thought it was going to work. Now, she needed a long, hot bath.

* * *

She woke with a start. She was still in the tub and the water had cooled, causing chill bumps on her legs and arms. Then she heard the knock on the door. She slipped into a bathrobe, tying her hair on top of her head.

Ramon’s face stared at her through the peephole. She flinched, fumbled with the chain, and opened the door. Ramon walked in, followed by Earl Lee.

Ramon sat on the couch and put his feet on the coffee table. Constanzia sat on the edge of the bed opposite him, holding her robe together tightly. Earl Lee hopped onto the dresser, looking over the uneaten pancakes as he moved them over.

“We’re going to ride back with you and the money; keep you safe.”

“How about that.” Earl Lee grinned. “We all in the same hotel, only two floors apart. Hey, Connie, you like my tan?” He pulled up his shirt-sleeve, showing sunburn topped by a white border of skin.

“Don’t call me Connie.” She kept her lips tight.

She looked from Ramon to Earl Lee and back to Ramon. “Is there a problem?”

Ear Lee cackled a short sound. “Hell no, Connie. Shit, you’re Hector’s main squeeze. Nothing ever wrong with you.” He brushed at his pant leg and grinned.

Ramon stretched his legs. "How did you get the money? Luis just tell you where he had it?"

"Something like that." She unclasped her hands, pulling the robe tighter about her shoulders and watching Ramon.

He looked out the window. "Good view."

Earl Lee jumped down, startling her. Her head snapped toward him. Her hands clutched the robe tighter as she watched him walk to the bathroom, look in and then walk back to the sliding glass doors. He looked left and right like he was going to cross a street, then stared at the marsh across the river and shrugged his shoulders. "Yeah, nice view Connie. You ready to go? You got the dough? I'll carry it down." He held out his hand toward her.

She frowned and looked back at Ramon. "The lawyer has it. I left it with him."

Ramon gave her a cold stare. "Hector said you had it."

"No. I gave it to Thompson yesterday. I asked him to call Hector, ask for instructions, find out what I was supposed to do," she finished, looking straight at Ramon.

"Mr. A says Thompson called him last night, said you had the money. He wonders why you just didn't call him, instead of bringing this lawyer in on it. How come?"

"Listen, Ramon. Thompson is keeping the money until Hector tells me what to do. He was supposed to explain it all to Hector."

"Explain what?" Ramon asked. "What do you mean?"

"Nothing." She stood up. "We'll have to get it from him."

Ramon nodded to Earl Lee. "Call his office."

"What's the number?"

Constanzia got her purse from the bed and handed him a white card.

Earl Lee dialed, waited and listened. He looked at Ramon. "This broad says he don't work on Saturdays. Won't be in till Monday. You have to leave a message."

Ramon thought a second. "See if he's got a home number."

Earl Lee dialed 411 and asked. "His number's unlisted."

"Maybe we can try the other lawyer." Constanzia's voice catching.

Ramon looked at her. "What other lawyer?"

"The one got the bond set for Luis."

She fumbled through her purse and pulled out a white card, holding it out to Ramon. Earl Lee took it.

"He told me that he did work for Thompson. Maybe he knows where he lives."

"Call him," Ramon said.

Earl Lee handed her the phone, dragging it from the nightstand to the bed and putting it within her reach.

Her finger was shaking as she punched the numbers. "Can I have a cigarette?" she asked.

Earl Lee, smiling, folded a stick of gum over with his tongue, then flicked a cigarette from a pack he took out of his shirt pocket. He held the Bic lighter to the end of the quivering cigarette and snapped it afire. She inhaled and blew a cloud of smoke toward the ceiling, all the while tapping her bare foot on the rug. Then she said, "Constanzia Salazar, Hyatt Hotel, Room 214. Please call."

She replaced the phone and glanced at Ramon. "He's not in either."

Ramon looked out the glass doors again. "We'll wait."

* * *

At the same time eighteen miles away, Rick looked down from a hundred feet. Four bars of aluminum tubing framed the ground.

The thirty-four horsepower Rotac engine roared through a baffled muffler that made the noise halfway bearable so long as you had earplugs. The nylon canopy of the Ultralight snapped in the rushing wind.

He lined up on the asphalt runway with the painted yellow circle; fighting the wind gusts when they came. Then he cut the throttle and descended to fifty feet. He kept his right hand on the stick while he grasped the nylon drop string with his left.

Pull the string, bombs away. The flour bag dropped straight for the yellow circle.

Rick banked the Ultralight, pushed hard right pedal and leaned into the stick. The Ultralight stood on wingtip, turning around so that he could see the bag hit. Bingo! He hit the edge of the yellow. Not a full point strike, but good enough to make the finals.

He straightened out and cut the engine, pulling the nose up, slowing and coming to a stall. The Ultralight dropped to the asphalt runway.

Norman Wright gave a thumbs-up signal as he took off while Rick taxied to the parking zone. The chief deputy's Fergie lifted off the ground, the wings bowing up. Rick still believed Norman needed a large winged Ultralight, like an Eagle or a Sprint. Either one of them could handle his weight without so much strain.

Rick pushed his Apache Ultralight to its trailer. A couple of guys standing around congratulated him on his strike; he felt a warm glow.

He opened a cooler and took out a Miller Lite. Most of the ice had melted, but it was still cold. Bryan Martin walked over. He was a good kid, fifteen and just learning to fly. Rick had taken him up a couple of times in the dual-seated trainer. Bryan worked off the cost of the lessons by helping out.

"Hey, Rick, that was a good shot," Bryan said.

"Maybe, but not a tiebreaker." He looked at his watch. "I might be able to make another one

if I can get refueled. Mind helping?” he asked.

“Sure.” Bryan ran off and brought back a red gas can.

Rick set up the short ladder behind the wing and Bryan handed the can to him. They both looked up, shading their eyes as they heard the Fergie coming overhead.

“Here comes Deputy Wright,” Bryan said.

Rick saw the flour bag dropping, trailing the nylon line.

The sack landed with a loud smack, all in the yellow, about eight inches off the center.

“Wow, that’s the best yet.” Bryan’s voice was full of excitement.

Rick shaded his eyes. “Gonna be hard to beat.”

Bryan scuffed his toe through the dust. “Well, I gotta go. I gotta be home by seven or Dad’ll skin me.”

Rick waved to his back.

After he completed the refueling, Rick went to his car. He picked up the car phone Billy Thompson had given him last Christmas. The gift included six months free service. At the end of this month, when the free service ran out, he would start the eighteen-dollar-a-month plan.

He dialed his office number, heard his voice giving the message, then held the playback beeper to the phone. A strained voice said, “Constanzia Salazar. Hyatt Hotel, Room 214. Please call.”

He wrote her name on a copy of Ultralight magazine and threw it on the seat.

* * *

An hour and two drops later, Rick started breaking down his Apache and tying it on the trailer behind his dirty white ‘86 Tornado. Loaded, he drove toward the exit, remembering when his

father trained pilots at Fort Stewart, using this same stage field. After it was all over, his father helped get it turned over to the county for public, recreational purposes. It was one of the few good things his father had done before he died, wrapped in the wreckage of his car on the curve in front of the Wilmington Island Inn and Country Club.

Old people were working garden plots as he left. He dodged kids running go-carts and model airplanes. As the sun went down, vapor lights flickered on, giving off a faint glow in the dusk. He turned his headlights on.

Turning right on the paved road, he dialed 411 and asked the operator for the number of the Hyatt Hotel.

“Pronto,” a woman’s voice answered, after he had asked for Room 214.

“This is Rick Speed, returning Ms. Salazar’s call.”

“This is Constanzia Salazar. I must talk to Mr. Thompson again. I’ve called his office, but no one answers. It’s very important.”

“Well, his home phone’s unlisted.”

“Si, I know. Could you give it to me?”

“Gee, I’m sorry, I couldn’t do that. But I could call him for you. Are you going to be at the hotel?”

“Gracias. I would appreciate that. Please ask him to call right away. It’s important. It could be a matter of life and death.”

Rick told her he would take care of it, and then he dialed Billy’s unlisted number and hung on for six rings before giving up.

CHAPTER 11

Rick got to his apartment exhausted. After a mile run this morning, then all day at the stage field, putting up the Apache, practicing, then taking it down. He stopped by Carey Hilliard's restaurant on Abercorn on the way back and had a supper of fried shrimp, coleslaw, hush puppies and sweet iced tea. As he headed for the shower, he remembered to call Billy.

Six more rings and still no answer. He dialed the Salazar woman to let her know he hadn't caught up with Billy, but he'd keep trying. Keep the clients happy, that's the golden rule.

Someone knocked as the phone was ringing. He hung up and opened the door.

"Hey, buddy." Billy Thompson shrugged through, pushing Rick away with his shoulder. He

set a gym bag down and threw a clothes bag on top, then plopped into a chair.

Rick closed the door. "What's up with you?"

"Had an argument. No, more like a fight. With Libby."

"What about this time?"

"Usual bullshit. You know, I'm never home; I'm at the office all the time; I'm not interested in her anymore, just how much money I can make, and so on. Same old song."

"You running around with other women didn't come up this time?" Rick teased.

Billy gave Rick a worn look. "Not this time. Anyway, can I stay tonight? I'll leave tomorrow. She'll cool off."

"Sure. Make yourself at home. Oh, by the way, Ms. Salazar wants you to call her. She's at the Hyatt, Room 214. Says it's important, maybe a matter of life and death."

"Fucking clients. They pay you a little money, and then bug you all the time. Probably wants me to go over and personally get Luis out on a Saturday night."

Rick shrugged. "Hey, if they pay, you play, right?"

"Yeah, well, right now I'm going to get a shower and then relax. I'll call later. Luis isn't going anywhere."

Billy clumped upstairs, dragging the luggage.

Rick heard the shower running. He flicked on the TV and stretched out on the couch. His next best favorite past time was watching TV. Mostly he watched the American Movie Channel and all the old movies in black and white. Movies weren't the same today, he thought. They had no depth.

In ten minutes he was asleep.

* * *

While Rick slept, he dreamed he heard a squeak, like a spring needing oil, then, a thump. His conscious mind asleep, his subconscious mind told him not to worry, Billy was in the house.

Then, Billy was shaking him. He struggled to sit up.

“Hey buddy, it’s three A.M., aren’t you going to bed?”

“Yeah.” Rick yawned and rubbed his eyes.

“I came down to get a drink and here you are, TV staring at you, remote control in your hand and you flicking through the channels. Hell, I thought you were awake,” Billy chuckled. “I’ve never seen anyone using a remote control in their sleep.”

Rick stretched. “Automatic reflex. I sleep best when I’m in front of the television.”

“Damnedest thing I ever saw.” Billy sounded awed.

Rick crawled upstairs and flopped on the bed, asleep immediately.

* * *

Rick’s eyes opened automatically. He raised his head and looked at the clock. Six thirty. Time to get up. No, wait a minute, it’s Sunday, no court, no work. He rolled over and fluffed the pillow.

A noise downstairs brought him awake, then he remembered Billy. Rick got up, pulled on his house shorts, and padded down the stairs.

“What the hell you doing up so early?” he asked, going past the half bath and into the kitchen.

Billy looked around the doorframe of the bathroom, lather on his face, a plastic razor in his hand. All smiles. “Hey, I called Libby this morning, and everything’s OK. She’s letting me back in.”

“So you’re shaving at six-thirty in the morning because you’re going home. Do you pull this trick so you can have passionate sex?”

Billy looked thoughtful. “I never thought of it, but maybe. That would explain our arguments, wouldn’t it?” He ducked back inside, humming a tune.

“Yeah, that would explain it.” Rick yawned, downing the rest of the milk he had poured. He ran water into the glass and put it upside down in the sink. “I’m going back to bed. Lock the door when you leave.”

“Sure, buddy. Sorry I woke you up. Dum-du-dee-dum, dum.” Billy humming, or singing, whatever it was.

Rick hadn’t seen Billy in such good spirits for several months. Maybe married life was working out for him, after all. He and Libby had a rocky start with lots of arguments and separations, but they always got back together.

Rick’s marriage plans had been destroyed with the grand jury investigation. Bonita Lou Courington couldn’t take the heat; he remembered shouting at her. She had cried, and although he felt betrayed and abandoned then, he had come to understand her decision. It was better that she married Alistair Bentley of Macon, Georgia, after all. He doubted he could have put up with her for more than a couple of years anyway. Still, the thought hurt sometimes.

He plopped on the bed and was dozing again when he faintly heard the front door open and close, then it was quiet again.

* * *

At the Hyatt on Bay Street, Earl Lee leaned over the railing and dropped spit bombs on the tourists. When he made a hit, he’d jump back so the target couldn’t see him. He saw Constanzia

come out of the bathroom and went back in, hoping to get a peek.

“You guys mind taking a shower?” Constanzia rubbed her hair with a towel. “It’s getting close in here.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Ramon said, leafing through the morning paper on the bed.

Earl Lee smiled his toothy grin, sniffing under his arm. “I ain’t ripe yet, Connie.”

“Stop calling me Connie.”

“Sure, Connie.” He smiled again.

Ramon looked at her. “Call the lawyer again. See if he talked to Thompson.”

“It’s Sunday. He’s not in his office.”

“So, leave a message.”

She dialed the number and left the message.

“I wonder why Thompson ain’t called,” Earl Lee asked.

Ramon snapped the paper and folded it. “Maybe Speed didn’t give him the message”

The phone rang. Constanzia grabbed it. “Yes?” She listened. “Just us.” She hung up, walked into the bathroom, and closed the door.

Ramon and Earl Lee looked at each other.

Earl Lee shouted at her. “Hey, who was that?”

She didn’t answer.

* * *

The red sheath dress she wore fit snugly around her hips, showing a panty line. Her glossy black hair hung on her shoulders. Earl Lee kept peeking into the bathroom as she looked in the mirror and smoothed the sides of the dress.

Only one person she’d be getting gussied up for, he knew that. And it wasn’t him.

“Aieeee, Mama!” Earl Lee whistled when she came out. He made his statement just as there was a knock on the door.

He moved to the door and put his eye to the peephole. “Hot-damned,” he said under his breath, jerking the chain loose.

“Mr. A.” He swept the door open and stepped back.

Hector wore a black silk shirt, open at the throat, showing a slim gold chain. His black slacks were pressed and neat. He moved slowly even though he was slim, and his dark eyes darted quickly. His hands were close to feminine.

Ramon stood up and moved to the side of the chair, giving up his seat. Hector hooked his thumb toward the door. “Come back in an hour.”

Ramon motioned Earl Lee out the door.

Once in the hall, Earl Lee started to say something, and Ramon held up a hand. They pushed into the stairwell and Ramon asked, “What?”

“What happened, Connie rip him off? Luis? Who got the money?” Earl Lee asked as they went down the fire stairs.

“You talk too much.”

Earl Lee clamped his mouth shut. Sons of bitches always acting all secretive. Hell, he knew plenty. He tell anybody what he knew, he could put them away forever. Maybe he’d get tired of being treated like hired help someday and show them. Always wanting him to do the dangerous shit but not letting him in on the whole story. He jammed both hands into his pockets and slouched along after Ramon.

* * *

Constanzia moved outside on the balcony. Hector came out and gave her a thin, forced smile. He stood beside her, looking over the river, both hands on the rail. "It's a pretty view, no?"

"Si," she answered.

She kept a docile, submissive look in place, hands gripping the railing, her fingernails imprinting her palms. She felt apprehensive and scared of what might come next.

"You got here from Key West very fast."

Constanzia didn't reply. She just kept looking over the river, hoping he wouldn't throw her over the railing.

"Also, I don't understand how you got the money from Luis so easy," he said, getting up close to her.

She glanced at him out of the corner of her eye.

She saw tourists walking in slow motion along the street below. She was afraid to say anything, not knowing what might set him off. Afraid if she said anything, he'd just dump her over the balcony railing. Afraid she'd hit one of those tourists.

"Are you and Luis close?" Hector asked.

"No," she said too quickly. "I saw him in jail, he told me where it was."

He moved closer, his chest touching her arm.

Suddenly, he reached out and grabbed her throat, pulling her face close to his and putting his left arm around her shoulders in an embrace. His fingers dug into her flesh, shutting off her air. Her ears rang, the noise increasing as he squeezed harder. Her mouth gaped open as she searched for some air to breathe.

"Tell me why I shouldn't throw you off here, Puta! Tell me!" He spoke through clenched teeth. "You better give me a good reason."

She tried to force an answer past her lips, but all she heard was a strangling sound where

the words were supposed to be, so she raised her hand. He released the pressure but kept a grip on her throat.

She heard the roaring in her ears lessen and the colors of the sky and the marsh across the river snapped into sharpness again. She faintly heard a Heron splash the surface of the water with a stab of his beak and the muted sounds of the cars and people below her on the street became audible again.

“I got the money back,” she strained, voice hoarse, not sounding like hers. It was almost as if she weren’t a part of the action but instead hearing a stranger saying the words she was thinking.

He tightened his fingers again. She choked and coughed through the stranglehold. But she knew better than to struggle, so she just stood there, gripping the railing in front of her, gasping and waiting for him to keep up the pressure until she blacked out.

“That’s not the real story.” His jaw still clenched, staring at her with those black eyes. He held her for an instant longer, then slowly released her.

She massaged her throat, choking, breathing in gasps. She took several deep breaths and then held on to the railing again. The building was swirling, and she couldn’t stop it.

“You’ve got five minutes. You better tell it all, or I’m going to dump your pretty little ass down there.” He pointed to the street, fifty feet below.

She told him the story, leaving out the part about her and Luis being lovers, telling him Luis sold the cocaine in order to impress her, trying to convince her to run away with him. He was always after her. She always rebuffed him. Then he got caught, and she came up to see Luis, following his instructions she reminded him. Luis told her everything, even where the money was. He wanted her to use the money to post his bond, and then they’d go somewhere. That was Luis’s plan, not hers.

She had never considered it, she said. The words were blurted out as fast as she could talk.

She was afraid and didn't know what to do, she went on. She knew that he trusted the lawyer, so she went to him to arrange the delivery, hoping that once he had the money, he would listen to her explanation. She was looking out for his interests. She delivered the money to Thompson and he was going to see that it was delivered.

“So, Thompson's going to give me the money?”

She clasped her throat, wishing the burning hurt would go away.

“That's really funny, Cara Mia. When Thompson called, he had a different story,” He said through tight lips.

“What do you mean?”

“He says you've got it. That you paid him ten grand to patch things up, and if he does, he gets another ten grand.”

“That's partly true,” she rasped. “But I gave it to him.”

“You get a receipt?”

“No. I couldn't make him. He said I had to trust him.”

“Bad mistake.”

“I didn't have a choice. The most important thing was to get the money back to you.”

“Why didn't you just bring it?”

“I was scared.”

“Scared? Of me?”

She nodded.

He motioned her inside and sat in the chair facing the bed. She stood with her right hand touching her throat, the other held across her chest.

He leaned back and motioned Constanzia to the bed. “I don't like the way this is coming

down. You should've just brought me the money and not involved the lawyer."

"I was afraid you'd think I was part of the rip-off. I didn't know what else to do. I thought since Thompson worked for you sometimes, he could make the delivery."

Hector picked up the phone and punched some numbers.

"Billy. How are you? Si, I'm fine. I need to see you. Tonight, as soon as possible. The Hyatt, Room 406. OK. . . How long? Good. I'll expect you." Hector set the phone down.

"Mr. Thompson is coming over." He leaned forward. "If he doesn't have the money, Cara Mia, we're going to have a problem."

"He has it."

"Okay." His eyes swept over her. "That's a pretty dress, Cara. Did you dress up just for me?"

"Yes."

"Good. Take your clothes off." He looked at his watch, then moved toward the bed.

* * *

Forty minutes later, Ramon and Hector were talking in front of the elevator as Constanzia watched from her position next to the potted Finca. Earl Lee stood apart. Hector patted Ramon on the shoulder. Ramon motioned to Earl Lee, and they walked toward the front desk. Hector strode over to her. "We're all going to Ramon's room."

Five minutes later they were in the room. Hector switched on the television, turned it to CNN and settled on the bed. He slipped his jacket off and threw it down, reached behind him and pulled a gun out of his belt, slipping it under the jacket.

She sat immobile for thirty minutes before she started losing the feeling in her legs. As she moved to restore circulation, the phone rang, and he answered it, telling the person on the other

end to come up.

She watched the digital clock blink off five minutes, and then there was a knock on the door. Hector pointed his finger at Constanzia and motioned to her. She walked to the door, her legs tingling from the renewed circulation and opened the door. Billy Thompson came into the room.

“Billy, you know Constanzia.” Hector waved toward her.

Billy paused, then said, “Hello Ms. Salazar. How have you been?”

Hector sat on the bed, and Billy sat across from him on the couch, the coffee table between them.

“How things been going, Mr. A?”

“Fine. Up until now. Constanzia says she gave you the cash for safekeeping.”

Billy looked at Constanzia, then back at Hector.

“She does?”

“That’s what she says.”

“I don’t know what’s going on, but I don’t like it. She paid me ten grand to contact you and arrange a meeting so she could return some money to you, just like I told you. I called you, and you’re here.”

Hector looked at Constanzia. She was trembling, clasping and unclasping her hands, not believing what she was hearing. “He’s lying, Hector!” she nearly shouted. “I gave him the money!”

Billy took out a cigarette and lighted it, his hands shaking. Hector squinted. “You nervous, Billy?”

“Hell yes, I’m nervous. This woman is accusing me of stealing your money and you’re looking at me as if you believe her.”

“Should I believe her?”

“No! I don’t have it! I never have had it! I’m a lawyer, for God’s sake! I’m not a thief!”

Hector smiled. "Some say they are the same thing."

"Well, I'm not." Billy becoming more subdued.

Constanzia scooted to the edge of the couch, tears in her eyes starting to brim over. "Hector, I got it from Luis, and I gave it to him. Believe me, please."

Hector stared at her for a second, then looked at Billy.

Billy held his hands in front of him, toward Hector. "Mr. A. You've trusted me with your business for a long time. I've never done you wrong. Hell there's no need, you pay me good. I'm not stupid."

A key snicked into the lock, the door opened, and Ramon and Earl Lee came in.

"Billy." Hector pointed. "My associates." Then he went on. "Let's see if I've got this straight. Luis takes a load of snow and sells it. Somehow, Constanzia gets the cash from Luis and claims she gave it to you. You say you don't have it because you wouldn't cross me." Hector looked at Ramon and Earl Lee. "I guess we'll have to give Constanzia a lie-detector test."

Constanzia drew back into the chair. Ramon switched off the lights. The only light remaining in the room came from the reflections from the street below and the television.

Constanzia grabbed the chair arms. Ramon and Earl Lee were suddenly in front of her, each grasping an arm. Earl Lee wrapped her left arm behind her and up, forcing her over and pushing her toward the sliding doors opening onto the balcony. Hector stayed on the bed. Billy's face was stark white, and his knees pumped up and down like he was running in place.

Earl Lee grabbed her arm and bent it behind her, causing her to bend over at the waist, then clumsily frog-walked her onto the balcony. He pushed her forward over the railing, controlling her from behind, bent at the waist with her feet still on the floor. Ramon was at her side, whispering in her ear.

Constanzia didn't hear what he was saying. She was begging not to be thrown over. Ramon

said something again. Something about quit hiding the money. Constanzia whined, “No . . . no . . . no . . . I don’t have it . . . I gave it to him . . . don’t . . . please.”

Ramon whispered in her ear again, telling her it wasn’t worth the fall, just give it up. Constanzia shook her head, crying, begging not to be thrown over. All she thought of was the fall and the sudden stop, four floors below.

Earl Lee stooped and grabbed her around the thighs, inching her up, farther over the rail. Constanzia cried louder, shaking her head. She arched back, being careful not to twist out of Earl Lee’s hands, trying to look over her shoulder. She had to get Hector’s attention. He knew she wasn’t lying! He had to!

She saw Billy sitting transfixed in the chair, staring through the open doors at her and the others. His hands gripped the arms of the chair, the cigarette lying forgotten on the floor at his feet. Hector was watching him and didn’t look at her.

Earl Lee lifted her higher and Constanzia howled a muffled, keening wail and looked down at the empty street far below. Ramon clasped his hand over her mouth. Suddenly, Earl Lee put Constanzia down. She fell onto the balcony in a sobbing heap, then crawled into the room, hunched in a corner, and watched Billy stand up and look over his shoulder, toward the hall door. She felt a trickle of urine seep down her leg. She had trouble keeping quiet. She bit her lips, calming herself. She knew Hector wasn’t going to kill her now. Maybe later, but not now. Not with the money missing. Hunched in the corner, she stifled all sound and watched Hector, hoping the shadows hid her face.

Hector’s stare traveled from her face to the lawyer. “Sit down, Billy.”

Billy saw the pistol in Hector’s hand pointing at his chest. He sat.

Hector sighed. “Well, Billy. I guess I believe Constanzia. She’s pretty and not so smart, but she wouldn’t get herself killed over money. She’s not that dumb. I think I have the picture now,” he

went on. "Constanzia was tempted and agreed to meet Luis. I don't think she would steal the product; that must have been Luis' idea. She found out it was ripped off, got scared, and came up with a plan to get it back to me. A way to gain my gratitude so I wouldn't kill her. She couldn't approach me directly -- I admit I have an explosive temper -- so she had to keep out of my way until I had it in my hands and cooled down. Then, she'd come back around." He appeared thoughtful and dipped the gun barrel, but kept it pointed at Billy. "She gave you the money."

"No . . . no. She didn't, honest . . . honest . . . she didn't."

"I don't believe you." Hector crooked his finger at Ramon. "Now, we're going to give you the lie-detector test."

Earl Lee grabbed Billy by the hair, and Ramon pressed a pistol against his neck. They jerked him out of the chair. The front of his pants were wet as he collapsed to his knees.

"Wait! wait!" Billy pleaded.

Hector gave Ramon a sign.

Ramon was getting tired of this shit. Hell, he would have started with one of his kneecaps, and if that hadn't convinced him, he'd went to his ankles and elbows next. Senor Lawyer could imagine what he'd look like if they put a bullet through each one of those joints. He would talk. But, Ramon sighed, he wasn't the boss.

He pushed and pulled Billy to the balcony, Earl Lee helping. Then Earl Lee slipped behind them and twisted Billy's arm around and up.

Ramon whispered fiercely in Billy's ear. "Now listen, motherfucker. The boss ain't gonna take no shit. You tell me where the money is, or you're dead."

Ramon pushed the barrel of the pistol hard into Billy's side. Billy wobbled off balance, tipped precariously by Earl Lee behind him, who was keeping the pressure on his arm. Ramon had a fistful of coat, keeping him from going over the railing.

Billy was stuttering, saying words nobody could understand. Trying to say something about the money, over and over. Earl Lee jacked him up some more, pushing him farther over the rail.

“OK, OK, OK,” Billy said, stammering.

Ramon leaned forward.

“Rick. Rick Speed.” Billy’s voice breaking.

Ramon heard Hector snap his fingers. He stepped away from Billy and let the gun down, smiling at Hector. Earl Lee let go of Billy’s arm and stepped back. But Billy was still over-balanced, leaning forward without anyone holding him, he tipped, and fell, end over end, smashing into the pavement with a dull thud.

“Goddamn!” Earl Lee exclaimed, jumping to the rail and looking down.

Hector was on his feet. “What did you do?” he shouted, pointing his gun at Earl Lee.

Earl Lee held his hands up in front of him. “Nothing. nothing. I just let go of him. I didn’t push him.”

Hector lowered the gun and looked over the railing. Then he stepped back and said, “Clean this room out. Don’t attract any attention, but get the hell out of here.”

CHAPTER 12

Constanzia's internal organs quivered uncontrollably and she felt bile and nausea rising in her throat as Hector led her to the door. Ramon and Earl Lee grabbed towels and started wiping down all the furniture. She needed to clean herself up. She knew she stank.

Hector checked the hallway, then led the way down the stairwell to the second floor, pulling her along behind. She followed on trembling legs that were about to give way. They entered Constanzia's room, and he immediately grabbed a handful of her hair and slammed her onto the bed. "I should kill you!" Hector stared into her face.

"No, please. I love you," Constanzia cried. She didn't know what else to say. She just hoped that he wouldn't kill her.

The gun pressed hard into her ribs. She held her hands in front of her in supplication, pleading with him through expression and manner. He looked at her, his eyes dark and hard, as if making a decision.

She parted her legs slightly, the red sheath dress restricting her movement, the bed rustling slightly. She gazed directly into his eyes, hiding the fear she felt, and moved her legs again, trying to get his mind off killing her and channel his actions into a familiar pattern, a pattern she felt she

could control. If she could arouse him sufficiently, she could regain control. She moved under him again, more boldly this time, parting her lips, trying to tilt her head back, faking arousal.

He released his grip on her hair and smoothed his hand over her cheek, down her neck and across the exposed cleavage of her breasts. Suddenly he ripped her dress to her waist, then tore the delicate red panties off her.

He threw the pistol onto the bed and unbuckled his belt. She moved her legs slightly apart, watching him through hooded eyes, submissive, yet seductive. At least as much as she could be in her unkept condition. She knew Hector didn't care about romance. Violence turned him on and she had to use her sex when necessary.

She cried out when he forced himself into her. She squeezed her eyes shut and bit her lower lip. Her left hand grabbed a handful of bed cover. She had control now. The fear of imminent death receded as she made the noises that sparked his actions.

As her hand grasped the cover, she touched the pistol just as she heard the police sirens and the warbling cry of the emergency vehicles on the street below. Her eyes snapped open and she twisted her head away from him laboring above her. It lay at the end of her fingers. She stretched and her hand closed around the butt of the pistol. She knew she could be rid of Hector with one quick movement and for a moment she knew she could do it. She slipped her finger through the trigger guard and started to cock the hammer with her thumb. Kill or be killed, she thought. A surge of heroic resolve flooded her body, the pistol giving her a powerful sense of control. She grasped it more firmly.

He strained against her and then stopped. She quickly raised the gun and pressed it against his chest. His head snapped down. He shifted his weight off his right arm and grabbed the pistol, forcing his first finger between the falling hammer and the firing pin. Holding her hand with the gun against his chest, his face slowly creased into a manical smile. She glanced at the pistol in her

hand, inches from her eyes, and saw the hammer pinching his finger.

She sagged, all resolve disappearing, the fear returning. Pushing himself up from the bed, he zipped his pants and flopped onto the couch, breathing hard. He laid the pistol in his lap and leaned back, eyes closed. "Get up," he said roughly. "Get dressed."

She sneaked into the bathroom, closed the door and sat on the toilet, knees and hands shaking. She grabbed a towel, folded it double and smashed it into her face, muffling the sobs racking her body, feeling the relief flood through her. She was still alive!

Ten minutes later, washed and new makeup applied, she slipped into a pair of Levi's jeans and a plaid shirt, then settled onto the couch, brushing her hair. She knew she had bought more time. She knew the immediate danger was past, but her hands wouldn't quit trembling.

Two taps sounded on the hallway door. Hector opened the door to Ramon and Earl Lee. She could still hear emergency vehicle sirens blaring on the street below the hotel.

"Everything's out and the room's clean," Ramon said. Earl Lee confirmed by bobbing his head.

"Good. I want you both out of here."

"What about this room?" Ramon asked.

"Forget it. Don't carry any luggage as you leave. Don't hurry. Take it easy. Don't draw any attention to yourselves."

They slipped out the door. Hector locked the door behind them, then stepped to the bed.

He tucked the gun into his belt, pointed his finger at her and said, "You're lucky the lawyer took the money and not you. Now we have to find out what he did with it." He stared at her, inviting her comments.

She found her voice. "He mentioned Speed. He's the lawyer got the bond set for Luis."

"You know him?"

“I’ve only talked to him on the phone.”

Hector started pacing. “We’re going to talk to him, see what we can find out.” Then he looked at her and his face brightened. “Do that thing with the gun next time. Only do it sooner, before I finish.” He laughed loudly, head back; the noise ricocheting around the room.

Afterwards, he paced the room off and on for the rest of the night, drinking coffee and smoking, talking to her sometimes, being quiet at others. Finally, at four A.M., when it was quiet outside and the emergency vehicles had left, he lay on the bed and started snoring.

Constanzia watched, chewing a nail, cracking her knuckles and finally, putting on some hand lotion, rubbing it in, taking her time, getting a handle on her nerves and assessing her situation.

At six-thirty, she flicked the television on, and a picture of Billy Thompson filled the screen. Constanzia pointed the remote control and raised the volume. Hector sat up.

“A Savannah lawyer apparently fell from the Hyatt Hotel on River Street early this morning. He was taken to Memorial Medical Center in critical condition. Police have not determined how the incident happened. This is Anita Gregory, WJCL, Channel 22.”

She muted the volume.

“Another problem.” Hector slammed his fist into the bed. “If that maricon don’t die, I’ve got another problem.”

“I’m not telling you what to do, but wouldn’t it be safer if you left?” Constanzia asked.

He looked at her carefully, narrowing his eyes.

“I mean, you’re not checked in, and no one knows you’re here. If he mentions you, you’d be in Miami.”

“And you’re willing to do what?”

“Whatever you need. Go talk to Speed. Try to get the money, whatever it takes.”

“Si, Cara. Then you get the money. How do I know you’re not going to take it and run?”

“I didn’t run with Luis. I tried to get the money back to you. I didn’t run.” Her voice soft as she looked down at her hands in her lap, trying to sound reasonable.

“Si, you did do that. Let me think. Call room service and get something.”

An hour later, Hector picked at his eggs and bit a mouthful. Constanzia sipped from a cup of coffee.

Hector laid the fork down and started talking. “You can’t talk to Speed about the money. You’ve got to get next to him. Get him to Miami, and we have a heart-to-heart--make him see it’s wise to ante up. Or offer him something--the chance to keep living.” He paused, lost in thought. “It might work.”

“I can do it.”

“I’m counting on you. You’re counting on you too. Comprende?”

“Si.” She knew exactly what he meant. It was up to her to get herself out of the predicament. It was up to her to do things that could keep her alive and the most important one right now was to agree with Hector and obey.

“That’s good.” He picked up his fork and shoveled in the last of his breakfast.

He stood and straightened his clothing, smoothing his hair and inspecting himself in the mirror. “You call me every day. I want to hear good news soon. Like, you’ve got the money or you’re bringing Mr. Speed.”

He paused with his hand on the doorknob, looking at her over his shoulder. “If you run, I’ll hunt you down. You won’t like what I’ll do before I kill you. Comprende?”

“I understand.”

He looked at her for a second longer, then left.

She let out a deep breath, thankful that she was still alive. She fought to stay calm, wiping

away each tear that brimmed over onto her cheeks, taking deep breaths and counting. She managed to keep her mind off death, and in ten minutes she began planning a way to meet Rick Speed and get the money from him, if he had it.

CHAPTER 13

“I’m sorry I couldn’t see you sooner, Ms. Salazar.” Rick settled behind his desk. “Billy Thompson is a good friend of mine. I’ve been at the hospital every day for the last few days.”

“I understand. I heard about his accident. Do they know how it happened?”

“I’m afraid not. He’s still unconscious.” He picked up a yellow pad. “Anyway, what can I do for you?”

“I’m Luis Ortenzia’s friend. I’m trying to get the money for his bond.” She crossed her legs slowly, revealing long, well-proportioned, tanned legs, all the way to her thigh. Rick noticed.

They sat in his windowless office, facing each other across his cluttered desk. He suddenly felt a pang of embarrassment for the used and battered desk and the clutter spread across it and his office in general. The walls were bleak and vacant. There weren’t any pictures of politicians

shaking his hand and he hadn't even bothered to frame his law school diploma and hang it up, or his licenses.

"Can you get the hundred thousand or were you going to put up a property bond?" he asked, moving some files into a neat pile and dropping paper clips into a dessert bowl on the right hand side of the desk.

"I don't have any property. Mr. Thompson has my money."

"He's got your money? You mean in his trust account?"

"I don't know. I delivered seven hundred thousand dollars to him on the Friday night before his accident."

He whistled. "He's holding seven hundred thousand dollars?"

"I dealt only with him. I don't know anyone else in his company. I would like for you to get my money from them. Then I can put up a cash bond for Luis."

"I'll contact the firm and tell them. I'll need a retainer contract from you, so they'll know I represent you now."

"Gracias, I appreciate your help."

"I charge a hundred dollars an hour." He gauged her reaction, ready to come down some if she seemed hesitant.

She leaned over, extending her hand to close the deal and showing him her cleavage, smiling. He extended his hand, smiling right back.

"Fine. I'm still staying at the Hyatt. Same room. Can you let me know something soon? Its boring, being here, waiting around."

Rick wondered if he were being invited. That would be nice. "Sure, I'll let you know something today."

He watched her get up. He stood, then asked, "I don't mean to be personal or anything, but

is Mr. Ortenzia your husband?" He left it hanging, hoping she'd respond and that he hadn't misjudged her actions.

She showed broad white teeth. "No. Just a friend. He and I work for the same company. Actually, I'm here because my boss sent me to help Luis."

"Good." He felt self-conscious, slightly embarrassed.

He watched her leave. Long, tan legs. Tight dress, mid-thigh; low-cut blouse; olive skin. Long, black, shiny hair.

After the door closed, he sat and punched the number of Billy's office and found out that he had to talk to Mr. Livingston himself to find out about Mr. Thompson's accounts. No, Mr. Livingston was not available.

He hung up and wrote a letter outlining his representation, date of the payment to Billy, and a refund request, with instructions to Marie to type and mail it along with a copy of the retainer contract.

* * *

It was around five-thirty when he got back from the jail. Four files on the newly court-appointed cases lay on his desk. Forty dollars an hour wasn't much, but it paid the rent. He tried Livingston's office, again without success. He located the Hyatt's number in the yellow pages and called.

"Pronto," she said after two rings.

"Hi, Rick Speed. I tried calling Thompson's office, but haven't got any news yet. I wrote a letter just in case."

"Gracias, Rick. I appreciate it."

“Well, maybe tomorrow. OK?”

“Si. I know you’ll get results.”

“OK. Well, I’ll let you know.” Rick tried to think of something else to say; something to keep her on the line so he could build up his nerve to ask her out.

Then, she solved the problem. “Would you care to have a drink?”

Rick experienced joy. Joy that he was surprised and joy that she asked. “Sure, sure. How about I meet you in the bar, your hotel?”

“Bueno. Call me when you get here.”

He beamed and felt better than he had at any other time during the past year. He knew that one of the rules of lawyering was not to get involved with your clients. It tended to cloud your judgment and could put you at a disadvantage if the case got contested and hard choices had to be made. But there was nothing wrong with having a drink and discussing the case. He’d keep it professional.

Twenty minutes later, Rick called Constanzia from the bar of the Hyatt. She came dressed in a tight black dress that clung to her legs and back and curved around her hips like the skin of a black snake, looking wet and undulating when she walked. She sat across from him and leaned forward, “So, Rick, tell me about yourself.”

* * *

The noise from the ship’s horn rattled the window. Rick stirred and reached for Constanzia beside him. Sunlight back-lighted the double glass doors, and he could see the crew standing on the upper deck of the ship passing by. The curtains covering the door were white and gauze like; dust motes floated in the air.

“Hey, you want some breakfast?” he asked, nuzzling her ear.

After room service delivered the pancakes, bacon and orange juice, they set the tray in the middle of the bed, ate and talked all through breakfast. Rick set the dishes outside the door when they finished.

She got up, laid a line of coke on the dresser, and inhaled it.

“Want a hit?” she asked, holding out the rolled bill to him.

“No, thank you.”

“Last night your first time?”

“First time.”

“Good?”

“Different. You were good.” Rick openly admired her body.

Drinking until the bar closed was not usually his style, but she was friendly, and keeping her at a professional distance became less important as the evening progressed. They ordered wine with dinner, then more wine, then a few martinis. He offered to walk her to her room and she accepted; she invited him in and they sat and talked until all the street noises were quiet outside and the eastern sky was tinted pink.

The cocaine was really an afterthought, and when she offered, he felt adventurous, probably because he was intoxicated by the ambiance of the evening and her dusky beauty. For whatever reason, he did it, then felt paranoid, afraid the cops knew he was snorting coke and would break the door in any second, but that first wave of fear passed, then the sensation came.

He had never felt anything like it in his life. Colors were accentuated and the world outside the window was beautiful. Constanzia was beautiful and sultry and inviting.

When she peeled the skin-tight dress off and after seeing her naked body, he knew he couldn't resist her offer.

Sex with her was so intense and his orgasm so violent, he thought his testicles would explode. He remembered her mouth, open and hungry, trying to capture his lips. Her fingers trailing sparking lines down his back and then they coupled, again and again, and again. The fire consumed them. The passion was demanding and finally, blissful undreaming sleep. Undisturbed, until the ship's horn.

They smiled at each other, each one causing the other to smile broader. She jumped on him, pressing him into the warm bed covers. He rolled her over and found her lips. She guided him toward the adventure again.

* * *

At four-thirty the same afternoon, Rick's skin tingled from the shower. Constanzia sat cross-legged in the chair at the end of the bed. The room was permeated by the pleasant order of clean bodies, baby powder, and fulfilled sex.

Rick was flushed with the feeling of shared intimacy as he slipped his arms into his shirt. He tucked his shirt in and cinched his belt. "Who's going to put up the bond for Luis?" he asked.

She shrugged. "I'll use the money you get back."

"That may take some time. How about your boss?"

"Maybe."

He slipped into his pants. "I hate to, but I gotta go."

She came to him and stroked his neck, her face close, warm smelling, lips pouty and swollen.

"When are you coming back?" Her words an invitation and Rick hardly believing she was serious. But hell, he wasn't going to pass up the opportunity.

He slipped his arms around her waist and pulled her closer to him. "As soon as possible."

“I can’t wait.”

He kissed her shoulder. He knew she was wicked and dangerous. She was from a different world, an alien culture, one with which he had never had contact. A world populated by people speaking strange-sounding words he didn’t understand. The danger of the situation excited him, creating something in him that had never been there before. He never considered that he would ever venture across the line into the criminal world. Then he laughed at himself and his paranoia. Hell, it was just a little hit of cocaine. It was just recreational.

* * *

Two hours later, Constanzia was still in the room when she picked up the phone as it rang.
“Pronto.”

“Call me on the private line,” Hector said.

She dialed the number after he disconnected, feeling relief that he was in Miami, six hundred miles south.

The phone rang once. “Have you got any news?” he asked.

“Si. I’ve got the lawyer. He’s going to get the money. I’ve got him working on it now.”

“En que forma?”

“I don’t know how. He just said he’d try to get it.”

“Que cosa?” Hector asked.

“Nothing else.” But she knew her response was too quick. She knew he could hear the fear creeping into her voice.

He clucked into the phone. “You’re not doing well, Cara Mia. You have nothing else for me?”

She remembered something else. “There is. Thompson’s still alive, still in the hospital.”

He paused. She watched the red numbers on the digital clock beside the bed blink through the next number. Finally, he said, "That's a problem."

She didn't say anything, not knowing if he wanted a comment or not.

"I said, esa una problema!" he raised his voice.

"Si, it is." She spoke hurriedly, wanting to please him but not knowing what he wanted from her.

"It has to be taken care of," he went on, his voice returning to normal conversation level, but still stern.

"I can't do that," she finally whispered.

"You don't have a choice, unless you want me to send Ramon back. He could remind you what you're supposed to do."

She had to buy some time to think. She didn't want Ramon back, so she said, "No, that's not necessary."

"Bueno. Call me when you have more news. Good news. Do you understand?"

"Si. I understand."

The phone line went dead and she sat staring at the receiver for ten minutes, trying to think of some other solution to the problem, some other way to handle it and keep Hector satisfied. There had to be a way. She knew she couldn't kill Billy Thompson.

CHAPTER 14

That same evening, Rick looked into Billy's pale face framed by a turban like bandage. His arms and legs hung from ropes and a clear plastic tube ran under his nostrils to a bottle with

“Oxygen” stenciled on it. A drip bag with a tube running to Billy’s left arm stood sentinel at the head of the bed.

“He’s still unconscious,” a nurse said from the doorway.

Billy lay silent. Every minute or so, he made a noise deep in his throat, as if he were trying to say something, but couldn’t form the words.

“Will he make it?” he asked the nurse.

“It’s touch and go right now. He’s still critical.”

What had Billy been doing at the Hyatt that caused him to fall to the cobblestones on River Street? Whose room had he been in? What could have happened? Rick didn’t think Billy was the suicide type. Had it been an accident? Maybe he was partying and horsing around and tripped over the railing of the balcony. But if that were true, why didn’t someone come forward?

His chest ached to see Billy so beat up and near death. Please God, if there is one, don’t let him die, Rick silently prayed.

Billy mumbled something again.

“What?” Rick whispered. “What is it, Billy?”

Billy was quiet.

The nurse poked her head into the room again. “You should let him rest now. The doctor doesn’t expect him to come out of it anytime soon.”

“He was mumbling something.” Rick felt helpless and his voice cracked, but he wasn’t going to break down in front of this stranger, so he cleared his throat and stood straighter.

Her voice was soft. “They often do . . . I suppose a coma may be something like dreaming. Patients often say things, but they don’t make much sense. Why don’t you go down to the lounge? I’ll call you as soon as I check him over and clean things up.”

Rick shuffled to the lounge at the end of the hall. He felt there was something he must do; all

the while knowing he wasn't able to do anything.

He dropped a quarter in the coffee machine. The cup dropped and filled with coffee.

"What's the story, Speed?" James Morrow asked from the door of the lounge.

Rick looked at Morrow and frowned. "You're the cop, you tell me."

"We don't think it was a suicide try."

"No way."

"A lady was walking River Street and saw him fall, she's not sure from which room."

"Was he registered?"

"No." Morrow looked around. "He was in the bar with a companion. She says he was meeting someone for a few minutes. Doesn't know who or what room."

"Any connections?"

"Not yet. Might have been an accident. Maybe the other person got scared and ran. Do you know who he was meeting?"

Rick sipped the coffee, then made a face and dumped the cup in the trash.

"Blood test showed a point zero-nine. Not enough to be stumbling drunk." Morrow cracked a lifesaver between his teeth. "Nothing else."

Rick looked for a machine that sold hot chocolate. "Who's the companion?"

"Betty Sims."

Rick's head snapped up. Judge Sims's daughter? Rick was stunned.

What was Billy doing with Betty Sims? She was an old maid. At least ten or fifteen years older than Billy. Always living at home with her father, the Judge.

"Business or social?" Rick asked.

"Social. They've been a number for about a year."

“Whatta you mean?” Rick asked.

“Seeing each other. Doing it. Having an affair, whatever you want to call it.”

Morrow’s coffee cup dropped as soon as the quarter hit the change box. He took a sip before turning back to Rick.

Rick found it hard to believe Billy could have been attracted to her. He usually chased younger women. “I didn’t know.”

“It seems they were keeping it quiet. No wonder. She must be forty. What’s he? Didn’t you go to law school together? What’s he, same age as you? Bout twenty-nine, thirty?”

“Twenty-nine.” Rick still finding it hard to believe; unable to reconcile the actions with the people. Billy having an affair with Betty Sims. What would he possibly see in her?

Rick glanced over Morrow’s shoulder and saw a person with blond hair go into Billy’s room. He knew Libby wasn’t blond. He didn’t know if Betty was or not. The nurse must have finished sprucing up. He decided to wait to go back to the room, reasoning that more than one visitor at a time might be taxing on Billy. Although he disliked Morrow, he didn’t see any way out of being cornered in here with him.

“Is there anything you can tell me?” Morrow asked.

“Nope. Have they found out anything on Parker?” Rick asked.

“Only that someone was asking around for him at the Burger King. Claimed he was a cop. They’re making a composite.”

Suddenly, the hallway was noisy, full of people running. The loudspeaker declaring, “Stat, stat, room 302.”

Rick hurried to the door of the lounge. Several people in white uniforms pushed into Billy’s room down the hall.

Morrow looked over his shoulder. “What’s going on?”

"I don't know." Rick broke into a run toward Billy's room.

He hurried along the hallway, dodging an orderly pushing a cart, and then trying to slip around a blond nurse coming out of Billy's room.

The nurse he'd talked to earlier pushed him back into the hallway. "You can't come in here."

"What happened?" Rick craned to look around her.

"Get out of the way!" A doctor yelled, shoving past them.

Voices came from Billy's room, urgent, strident, but with a sound of underlying control.

"Get me a Stat Unit!"

"It's coming!"

"We got a straight line!"

"Phenobarb, 2cc's!"

The room was a rustle of activity. An orderly with a pitted face pushed a piece of stainless steel machinery past him. He felt someone pull on him.

Morrow tugged on his sleeve. "Come over here. Get out of the way."

Rick let himself be guided down the hall. He sat in a chair by the nurse's station. After three or four minutes the frenetic activity stopped. One by one, the nurses and doctors came out of Billy's room. A young doctor stopped in front of them.

Rick felt a constricting lump rise in his throat. "What happened?" He tried to get out of his chair and stand up, but his legs felt useless.

"Are you family?" The doctor spoke in a low voice.

"No. A close friend."

"He's gone."

"Dead?"

The doctor placed his hand on Rick's shoulder.

“Is the visitor still with him?”

“Visitor?” the doctor asked.

“A visitor was with him.” Rick looked around frantically, searching the hallways, looking for a woman with blond hair.

“No one was with him,” the doctor said.

Rick looked at the doctor, then at Morrow.

“Someone went into the room, not more than five minutes ago. A blonde. I didn’t see her come out.”

Morrow took Rick’s arm and guided him away from the doctor, back toward the lounge. “Tell me.” His voice dropping into professional mode.

CHAPTER 15

Rick shuffled through the pile of letters on his desk. Four days' accumulation, and there were only seven. He opened a letter from Livingston and Associates. There wasn't any record of fees or other money paid to the firm by Constanzia Salazar.

He punched numbers into the phone. Constanzia answered on the fourth ring.

"How have you been?" she asked. "I've missed you."

"Billy's firm says there's no record that you paid any money."

"That's impossible."

"I'll try to see Livingston himself, but it probably won't help."

"In the meantime, how about coming to see me. It's been four days." Her voice had gone soft again.

He felt like smiling for the first time in those four days. Billy's funeral had been tough. He still couldn't make himself face the reality that Billy was gone. And he was feeling less and less that it had been accident. But he did want to see her again. "See you in an hour."

As he was putting the phone down, it rang. He put it to his ear again.

"Speed? This is Morrow. I need to meet with you and get a taped statement."

“What for?” Rick asked.

“We need to go over the facts again. I need to get everything you saw at the hospital in an affidavit.”

“I don’t have time. Besides, I’ve already told you everything. Get it typed up, I’ll review it and read it.”

Morrow’s voice was stern. “Don’t give me any crap. I want to get your statement on tape.”

“Get a subpoena!” Rick slammed the receiver down. The phone had rung eleven more times before Rick got out the door.

* * *

Rick worked up a light sweat walking to the parking garage a block from his office. He ran down the steps from street level to his parking spot. The garage was dim. Long shadows lay between the cars and hid the corners. He fumbled with his keys, finally found the right one and opened his car door. He was halfway into the car, one leg in, one leg out, when the door suddenly slammed against him, pinning him in place. He half stood, midway through the motion of sitting down, his head caught between the top of the door and the car.

A swarthy face peered at him just inside his peripheral vision.

“We need to talk,” the man said. He had a Spanish or Cuban accent.

Rick couldn’t talk, but he strangled out a reply, trying to nod his head. The door eased off and he flopped into the seat. He dropped the keys, his hands going to his neck to massage the pain away. He bent over the steering wheel and coughed, then felt rough hands pulling him out of the car.

“I said OK!” He winced at the fury of his own voice.

A skinny white guy pulled Rick to his feet and slammed him against the side of the car, forcing his arm against Rick's neck, arching him back over the top edge of the car's roof. The man was shorter than Rick, with a pockmarked face and a toothpick bobbing in the corner of his mouth, but his arm was like a steel band across Rick's throat.

"Don't try anything, or I'll break your fucking neck," the man with the toothpick said.

Rick turned his palms up in surrender.

The skinny guy pushed away from him. Rick kept the car against his back. The Hispanic looked around the parking garage.

The skinny guy stood five feet away, at the back of Rick's white Tornado. He held a black pistol leveled at Rick's stomach, and below the edge of the car, out of sight of anyone passing by.

"The man wants his money," the Hispanic said.

"What?" Rick kept his eyes on the pistol.

"Don't give us no shit, man," the skinny one snarled.

Rick massaged his neck. At first he thought he was being mugged, then he realized they weren't making a move for his watch or wallet. "What money?"

"Luis's money," Skinny said.

"Luis didn't give me any money."

"Your friend Thompson gave it to you," the Hispanic said.

"The fifteen hundred?" Rick asked.

Skinny edged a little closer, the gun pointed at Rick's stomach. Rick knew he could kick the gun out of the guy's hand, but then the Hispanic would have him. Given the strength in the little guy's arms, he knew he couldn't take on the two of them and win.

Skinny shifted his weight and switched hands with the pistol. "I'm getting real tired of waiting."

“Thompson gave me fifteen hundred to get Luis’s bond set. But I don’t know why you’d want that money.”

The Hispanic stepped closer, careful not to block Skinny’s gun.

“I’m talking about the seven hundred thousand. The man wants his money. Now!”

“Thompson didn’t give me anything like that! Just the money to get the bond set! I swear!”

Skinny stepped close and punched the gun into his ribs. “I said I’m getting real tired.”

“How am I going to get through to you?” the Hispanic asked.

“Maybe he wants to take a high dive off the Hyatt, like his buddy,” Skinny snickered.

Rick’s eyes snapped to him. The reference to the high dive was the same as an admission of guilt. These were the guys who pushed Billy. He felt anger boil up, but he knew he had to keep his control. He moved his head around, hoping for a cop car--or any car--to come through just so he’d have a chance to run and scream. But the garage was quiet.

“You got a big mouth.” The Hispanic glared at the skinny guy.

Rick tried to memorize their faces so he would be able to identify them later. “Look, guys, I really don’t know what you’re talking about. I’ve got a client who claims she gave Billy a bunch of money, but the firm denies it. Otherwise, I’m in the dark.”

The skinny guys mouth stretched into a sneer. “Maybe I can enlighten you.” He thumbed the pistols hammer back. The click sounded very loud.

The Hispanic moved closer. “Thompson said you had the money. He wouldn’t lie, the fix he was in. You got twenty-four hours to get the money. We’ll be back and next time we’re not going to be nice. Comprende?”

Rick met their gaze. As they disappeared into the shadows, Rick bent over, hands on his knees, and tried to stop shaking from the tension release. He listened to the echoes of their footsteps getting fainter. He had to pee badly.

He had to tell someone, too. These guys dumped Billy off the hotel. He had to call the cops and see that they were arrested.

* * *

Thirty minutes later, Constanzia opened her door on the first knock. She moved toward him, and then stopped.

“What’s the matter?” she asked.

He brushed past her and checked his neck in the bathroom mirror, soaked a washcloth in cold water, and held it to the left side, then sat on the bed. He told her what had happened and described the two guys.

She sat back on her heels. “Did you call the police?”

“No.”

“Are you going to?”

“Hell, yes. They said I had twenty-four hours to get them the money you gave Billy. They threw Billy off the hotel. I knew he didn’t fall!”

She walked across the room and sat in a chair. “You have to give them the money. They’ll kill you if you don’t.”

“What’s going on?” he asked.

She let out a deep breath. “Luis stole a shipment of cocaine. I got the money from him and gave it to Thompson. Then Thompson said I didn’t give it to him. He was supposed to turn it over to Hector, but he said he had given it to you.”

“Gave it to me? You heard him say that? He didn’t give me anything! They threw Billy off, didn’t they?”

“No. It was an accident.”

“These jerks just so much as told me they threw him off. Besides, it wasn’t an accident in the hospital.”

“The hospital?” she asked.

“Some blonde visited Billy in the hospital. A few minutes later, he died.”

“Who?”

“I don’t know. I saw someone go into his room. I didn’t see anyone leave.” Rick paced around, rubbing his neck, flexing his shoulders.

She looked at him, keeping silent.

He suddenly stopped and stared back. A light just turned on in his brain.

“Is that what we’re about?” he asked.

Tears welled in her eyes. “I’m supposed to get the money from you.” A tear trickled down her cheek.

“Strictly business then.” He kept his voice flat, devoid of emotion.

She shrugged and wiped her eyes. “At first. Now, I don’t know. I like you. I don’t want you to get hurt. I don’t want to get hurt, either.”

“I don’t have the money.” He sat close to her.

“Then I’m dead. If I don’t get the money, they’ll kill me. It’s my responsibility.”

He went to the bathroom, rinsed the cloth in cold water and paced the room again. She watched him. She looked fragile, sitting hunched over dabbing her eyes, tears and mascara streaking her face, waiting. He realized she was depending on him to help her, to save her life. He sat with a sigh.

“I don’t have much of a choice, do I? They’re coming back tomorrow night, and they expect me to have the money.” He was talking more to himself than to her.

She went to the bathroom, wiped her face with a towel and touched up her eyeliner. He stood in the door. She opened a glass vial and tapped out a small hill of powder. She cut it into four lines, looked at him, offering, then rolled a dollar bill and sniffed up two lines in quick succession. She handed the tube to him. He brushed his nose and took the last two lines. She cleaned the white spot with her fingers, then took his hand and led him to the bed.

“What can the cops do?” she asked as she slipped her clothes off.

“I don’t know. Maybe nothing.” He pulled off his shirt.

She lay in the crook of his body, skin to skin, her back to him. “Hold me?”

He nuzzled her hair, pulled the sheet over them and wrapped his arms around her. She was warm and soft. He felt protective. She needed him.

She nestled closer. “I feel safe with you.”

“Don’t.”

* * *

He awoke first--drowsy, warm, and erect. He touched her, and she responded, pulling him onto her. He was glad she had not left town, glad that she had been straight with him, telling him the whole story. And she was the most exotic woman he’d ever been with.

Afterward, they ordered room service and ate breakfast.

“Do you have any idea where he would have put the money?” she asked, around a piece of toast.

He tasted the eggs Benedict. “None.”

“How are you going to find it?”

“I don’t know yet.”

He wiped his mouth with the napkin, folded it, and laid it on the tray. The draperies were open, and the marsh stretched across the river. White herons circled, landed, and took off from the river's edge. "There's no way I can do anything by tonight. I don't even know where to start."

"Let's leave." The statement hung in the air, more of a suggestion than directions.

"And go where?"

"Miami."

He thought about it. "What good would that do?"

"I could talk to Hector. Tell him we need time to find the money."

Rick frowned. "Why would we go to Miami? It's not there."

"You could meet him face-to-face. Tell him what you've done so far. Your ideas. Convince him in person that you can recover the money."

"Why don't I just stay here?"

"Because he'll come up here and kill you."

"Not as long as he doesn't have the money."

She looked at him squarely. "Believe me. If he doesn't think you're making any progress at finding the money, he'll just kill you and be done with it."

Rick stroked his hair. "That is important."

"I could back you up. Tell him how hard you've been trying to find the money. He just wants his money."

"That'd take a lot of guts, going into his territory." He thought about it for a second. "It might show good faith, though. Let him know I'm willing to cooperate."

"He'd believe us. He'd give us some time."

"The two guys in the garage work for him?" he asked.

"Ramon and Earl Lee." She nodded.

He picked up the phone and dialed his part-time secretary at her home. He told her to file an emergency leave of absence for him. Forge his name; he didn't care. He'd be out of town for a few days, maybe a week.

Next, he called Chief Deputy Norman Wright and told him what had happened in the parking garage. He didn't give any names, just descriptions.

No, they didn't tell him what they wanted. No, nothing was taken from him. They wanted him to pay them money, a lot. They might have had something to do with Billy's death.

"Morrow is asking around for you," Norman said.

"Don't let him know I called. I'll be out of town for a few days."

"Do I need to know where you'll be?"

"No. Just make a report about the garage." Rick paused. "No use spending any time on it. I just want a record. You might tell Morrow about the two guys. He wanted a statement from me earlier."

"Will do. Anything else?"

"I'll call. Thanks."

"Nothing to it. Does this have anything to do with nailing Morrow?" Norman asked.

"I doubt he's involved after all. Too bad," Rick said, ruefully. "I wish he were."

"Good luck."

Rick hung up. "I hope this works."

Constanzia seemed very sure of herself as she dialed Hector. Mr. Speed has agreed to come to Miami to talk. He wants to cooperate, do everything possible to get the money back. No, he doesn't know where it's at, yet, but he's sure he can get it.

She held the phone out to Rick. "He wants to talk to you."

Rick hesitated, and then spoke into the phone. "Yes sir."

“I want to thank you for your cooperation, Mr. Speed.”

“Rick, call me Rick.”

“Bueno. Please call me Hector.”

“Thanks. I don’t know where the money is, but I can find it. Billy Thompson was a good friend and I know the family.”

“Gracias, Rick. I appreciate your help. The money is important to me.”

“I understand.”

“Do you have any ideas?” Hector asked.

“I can always file a claim in the estate, but that’s a last resort.”

“Si. I want to keep this as quiet as possible.”

“Right,” Rick said.

“We can have a profitable relationship, Mr. Speed.”

“What do you mean?”

“You may be able to handle my affairs. You could make a lot, working for me.”

“I’ll certainly consider it.”

Hector asked to speak to Constanzia again.

Rick handed the phone to her. They’d fly out of Savannah to Miami and would arrive late tonight. Yes, they’d stay at her house.

She hung up, smiling and full of confidence. Then she jumped on him playfully, knocking him back on the bed and sitting astride him. “Great! I knew he would be reasonable.” She rubbed noses and giggled.

“I still feel like I’m sitting down next to a rattlesnake.”

She nuzzled him playfully. “It’s OK. We’ll have fun.” She unbuttoned the top button of her jeans and slowly slipped the zipper down. She squirmed around. “Do I feel something?” She made

her voice low and seductive.

As they moved together, a fleeting thought skipped through Rick's mind.

The other world was getting closer. He might find out what it was really like across the line. He wouldn't get in too far--just enough to get out of this mess. Maybe, just maybe, he'd be able to set up Ramon and Earl Lee for a bust for pushing Billy. But to do that, he'd have to get in close, learn the operation as much as possible. It'd be dangerous as hell, but he owed it to Billy, no matter what Billy had done.

CHAPTER 15

The next morning, Rick wheeled his car into the parking lot of his apartment complex. He checked his watch. It was ten past ten and he was late. Constanzia expected him at ten.

He shoved the apartment door open and bounded up the stairs, taking them two at a time. Pulling a suitcase out of the closet, he filled it with a couple of shirts, shorts, socks and slacks. He threw his shaving gear and toothbrush in a ditty bag and dropped it in the suitcase.

The springs on the folding stair creaked when he pulled it down from the attic. The last time he had gone diving was July, two years ago. His wet suit, mask, and regulator were in a bag somewhere in the attic.

He rummaged around several boxes, moving some out of the way, lifting the flaps on others. When he moved a large box, another, smaller one fell off a gym bag, spilling pictures onto the attic floor. He gathered the pictures and placed them back into the box.

He didn't remember the gym bag and pulled it closer to him. It was blue, with YMCA stenciled in white letters on one side. The zipper slid back easily.

Rows of miniature portraits of Benjamin Franklin stared at him. The bag was filled with one hundred dollar bills.

"What the hell?" He stretched the top of the bag farther open and touched the money.

For the next ten minutes, he counted it. In the bag was six hundred ninety-seven thousand, four hundred dollars. He knew Billy had hidden the money. The creaking spring on the pull-down stairs struck a remembrance of the night Billy had stayed over. He felt numbed, realizing that Billy had stolen the money from Constanzia. No! He had stolen it from Hector Affianta.

It was hard to believe, and he searched for another explanation, finally deciding that Billy would have turned it over to Hector eventually. Then he changed his mind and knew he was just trying to find a way to preserve his memories of Billy. Still, Billy hadn't deserved to die. He didn't know how or why Billy had become involved in this mess, but he resolved to find out.

Still, he reasoned, all he had to do was get the money to Hector. Then a chilling thought hit him hard. What would stop Hector from killing him when he got the money? He knew Hector would probably see it as insurance not to have him around, he knew too much already. He was right in the middle of it.

Constanzia worked for Hector. Luis worked for Hector, and so did the two guys in the

garage. They had bragged about throwing Billy over and had threatened to do the same to him.

So, he concluded, it wasn't going to be as easy as it had seemed at first. Besides, how would he get the two guys for killing Billy? He knew he had to figure a way to stay alive, satisfy Hector, and make the killers pay. It wouldn't be easy. If he called the police right now, he'd probably be killed before they could get their investigation going. The police moved too slowly.

And what would he do with the money? He'd never seen so much before. For a second he imagined what Billy must have felt, and then he quickly pushed it out of his mind. He wasn't a thief and it pained him to believe that Billy had been. The worst lawyers in the world were the ones who stole their clients' money. Poor Billy. He had obviously succumbed to the temptation.

On the other hand, "the system" hadn't worked for him. His career had been ruined by the suspicion created by the grand jury investigation. His ambitions and hopes were gone simply because he couldn't fight the doubts in everyone's minds.

The money would make things easier for him. But it wasn't his and never would be. He had to get the money back to Hector or to the cops. He just didn't know how, yet.

The doorbell rang, and his heart leaped to his throat.

He closed the gym bag and put it back where he had found it, then set the box of pictures back in place.

He found the dive bag, grabbed it, and slid down the attic stair, slammed it closed and slipped the bolt.

James Morrow stared back at him through the peephole in the front door. He opened it. Morrow looked at the bag in Rick's hand. "Where you going, Speed?"

"What do you want?" Rick asked.

"I want your taped statement about what or whom you saw at the hospital."

Rick shrugged and led him into the living room, then went to the bar and splashed Jack

Daniel's Black Label into a whiskey glass, popped the cap off a ginger-ale bottle and swirled ice cubes around the glass with his finger. He took a long drink. His heart was still racing. He composed himself, covering the trembling of his hands with the ritual of making the drink.

After the glass was three-quarters empty and a warm glow was spreading through the middle of his body, he felt composed enough to address Morrow. Morrow was sitting on the couch, fumbling with a small tape recorder when he turned to face him.

"I didn't see who it was, just a blonde woman going into Billy's room. I didn't recognize her. She had street clothes and blonde hair; I was too far away to see her face. That's it."

He finished off his drink and rinsed the glass in the sink. Morrow was still fumbling with the tape recorder, and then he snapped it on and started talking into it, giving the date and time and Rick's name. Then he pressed a button and looked at Rick. "I'm going to take a full statement. If you don't want to give it here, I'll take you in, but you're going to give a statement."

Rick sat heavily. "Go ahead." The drink helped. He could handle this now.

Ten minutes later, Morrow looked at him, cocking his head. "You're not very observant."

"Lawyers aren't supposed to be observant, cops are. Now get out of here."

"Where are you going?"

"None of your business."

"Have you talked to Luis?" Morrow asked.

"No."

"I thought you were going to help."

"I am."

"You haven't helped shit. You haven't even talked to Luis."

"Jesus Christ," Rick shouted, standing. "You sound like someone's wife." Rick rubbed his face. "Hector."

“Hector? Hector who?” Morrow asked.

“Hector Affianta! I’m leaving for a few days. When I get back, I’ll know more. Right now I only know Hector.”

Morrow wrote in his notebook. “Give me a number.”

“Christ, Morrow, I don’t have a number. I don’t even know where I’m going to be staying yet.”

“How are you going?”

“Driving.” Rick strode to the front door and opened it. “Out! Now! I’m leaving.”

Morrow stood. “You’re gonna get your ass in trouble, Speed.”

“Good-bye,”

“When are you leaving?”

“Out!”

Rick slammed the door as Morrow stepped off the porch. He called Constanzia and told her he was on his way, and then ran out the door.

Halfway to his car, he slowed. A brown Thunderbird was parked behind his car, blocking it.

As he walked the rest of the way, the two men from the garage stood leering at him.

“Hey, Señor Speed. Where you going, man?” the skinny white guy asked.

Rick placed his dive gear and other luggage into the back seat.

“Ask your boss.” Rick stood by the door of his car and tried to stare them down. He looked away first.

The white guy jumped onto the fender and sat. The Hispanic leaned on the Thunderbird, staring at him with cold eyes.

“Yeah, we talked to him. He says don’t bother you, yet.” Skinny grinned and emphasized the last word.

“You want to get your car out of my way?”

“After I look in your bags, Amigo.”

“I thought your boss said not to bother me.”

“Well, he didn’t say I couldn’t look.” Earl Lee looked at Ramon. Ramon motioned toward the car.

Rick opened the door. “Have fun.”

Earl Lee rummaged through the dive gear and suitcase then looked at Ramon. “Nothing here, man. Want to look in the trunk?” he asked Ramon.

“Si.”

The trunk had an empty oilcan and a half-filled bottle of coolant, otherwise nothing.

Ramon got into the Thunderbird. Earl Lee grinned at Rick, jumped into the passenger seat and slammed the door. “We’ll be watching you, Señor Speedo.” He gave a mock salute as the car moved away.

Rick tried to fit the key into the ignition; his keys were jangling in his shaking hand, making it almost impossible. He wiped sweat off his forehead, looked in the mirror and slicked his hair back, then took a deep breath.

A shadow loomed in the driver’s side window, and he jumped involuntarily. Morrow rapped at him to lower the window.

“I thought you left,” Rick said as the window came down.

“Who’re those guys?”

“They might be the ones that killed Billy. I don’t know. They think I have something of theirs, but I don’t.”

“You got any proof? Enough to get a warrant?”

“I got nothing. Just a hunch, but maybe you should keep a tail on them.”

Morrow leaned into the window. “What’s going on, Speed?”

Rick looked at him calmly. "Get out of my way, Morrow."

Morrow straightened and stepped back. "I don't quit. I'm gonna watch you . . . and them."

"Great, just great." Rick ran the window up. He drove out of the apartment complex and then north on Abercorn Street, checking his rear-view mirror for the brown Thunderbird and Morrow. He didn't see either one.

When he felt confident that no one was following, he returned to the complex, parked on the opposite side of the building from his apartment and watched for ten minutes. When he failed to see anything that could be interpreted as surveillance, he quickly walked around the building to his apartment, let himself in and climbed back into the attic. He retrieved the YMCA bag full of money, stuffed it into a laundry bag and made it back to his car.

He waited ten more minutes, then confident he was not being watched, drove to the garage where he stored his Ultralight, climbed into the attic and hid the money under the loose insulation.

Fifteen minutes later he walked into Constanzia's room just as she snapped her suitcase shut. "I'm ready."

Rick plopped onto the bed. "Can't yet. We have to wait until it's dark."

"Why?"

"The goons may be following me."

"They won't bother us." Her voice lacked patience.

"Just the same, I don't want them on my ass."

She called the Key Air reservation desk. The operator put her on hold. Rick sat up. An idea just flashed into his head.

"Hey, give me the phone," he motioned.

The operator thanked him for holding. He asked her to book two on a Key Air flight whose departure time was as close as possible to any other flight leaving from a nearby gate. After a

pause, she told him their flight would be departing at nine-forty from Gate Three. Delta flight 306 would be departing Gate Four at nine-thirty. Both gates shared the same departure counter, one on one end of the room, the other opposite. The waiting rooms for both gates were combined.

“Thanks. Have the tickets at the gate for me. We’re going to be cutting it close.”

“What was that all about,” Constanzia asked.

“Escape and evasion.”

* * *

Rick stopped at the intersection of Georgia highways 17 and 144 in the middle of the little town of Richmond Hill. The drive south on State Road 17 from downtown Savannah had taken forty minutes. All the way, Rick kept glancing at the rear-view mirror.

“Where are we going?” Constanzia asked.

“I think we have some followers.”

She looked through the back window. “I don’t see anybody.”

The street lamps at the intersection washed the car in weak light. The sun dipped below the tree line in front of them.

Rick turned right, drove a half-mile, then abruptly drove into a parking lot and stopped, facing the street. He doused the lights and looked up just in time to see the brown Thunderbird scream past.

He saw the brake lights blink on and the car skidded into a side street. The white backup lights came on.

Rick left his lights off, eased out of the parking space and headed toward the exit. As the Thunderbird passed, he stomped the pedal and flicked on his headlights, fish-tailing the car onto

the highway and in the direction of Interstate 95, a mile away.

When he crested the on-ramp, heading north on I-95, no lights were behind him. He topped eighty across the Ogeechee River Bridge and slowed to enter the exit at Highway 204. Constanzia was keeping watch out the rear window.

His car screamed around the corner of the off-ramp just as a pair of headlights came into view. He shut off his lights and ran up to seventy in the dark. Letting off the accelerator, he allowed the car to coast down, not using his brakes.

He swerved right at Highway 204, back onto Highway 17 and then took a hard left and went under the overpass, flicked on his lights and made another left, back onto 204, going in the opposite direction. Constanzia held on to the door handle and braced herself. She made some comment about getting killed in the car and doing their job for them. Rick ignored her.

"That'll sure as hell lose them," he said, driving along the double-lane highway, then seeing the Thunderbird sweep past them, going the opposite direction.

Twenty minutes later Rick pulled into the airport terminal unloading area and gave the bags to the porter. No one followed.

* * *

Across the street, James Morrow threw the remains of his coffee out the window, got out and headed toward the terminal.

Morrow pushed through the doors just in time to see Rick and the girl head toward the boarding gates. He followed along, stayed back, but kept them in sight. He flashed his badge and walked around the security check.

When he noticed Rick glance over his shoulder, he slipped behind other passengers.

Halfway down the entry hall, he opened a door and walked along a hall without windows or doors, and then he rapped on the door to the security cubicle and panned his face to the camera. The electronic lock thunked, and he pushed through the door.

John Nickolson sat in front of a row of screens. His security guard uniform was tinted bluish-gray by the light of the monitors. He looked up when he heard Morrow's voice.

"Hey Jim, how are things?" Nickolson asked.

Morrow stepped to a monitor with Number Three pasted in the lower corner. "Not bad."

"Watch that guy and the girl," he pointed.

"What is it?"

"Nothing to worry about. I just want to see which gate they use."

"You gonna bustem?"

"Not right now."

Morrow got a cup of coffee from the pot on the table. He took a sip. "Christ almighty, Nickel! Who makes this coffee?"

"Gate Four!" Nickolson pointed.

"What flight is that?" Morrow asked.

Nickolson's fingers rapped the keyboard in front of him.

"Delta 306, destination Raleigh, North Carolina."

"Why God-forsaken North Carolina?" Morrow asked.

"The passengers are boarding. Your perps are getting into line." Nickolson checked the video recorder.

Morrow set the cup down and moved to the door. "OK. Thanks a lot. You need anything, let me know."

"Anytime." Nickolson waved.

Morrow started down the hall toward the front entrance. The security door behind him slammed open, banging off the wall. Nickolson shouted at him, motioning for him to hurry. Morrow broke into a short run back to the security room.

“They pulled a switch!” Nickolson yelled.

“What?”

“They didn’t get on the Delta flight. When they got to the gate, they turned and went to Gate Three. Key Air to Miami.”

“Thanks, Nickle, I owe you one.”

CHAPTER 16

James Morrow flexed his back, loosening the stiffness from sitting so long in the cramped aircraft seat. The department wouldn't spring for first class. It took him a week to get the papers approved for his trip, coordinating with Miami PD and the GBI, everybody getting in their two cents' worth. Finally, approval came through the morning before from Atlanta, and he picked up his travel vouchers, packed a bag, and left Savannah. He had to go the long way around, through Atlanta to Miami. He carried his files in the vinyl briefcase, and his pistol was checked with Security.

His wife, Sharon, had kissed him at the airport in Savannah and waved as he left. He hated leaving her after only three months of being married, but it couldn't be helped. He knew Speed was going in over his head--not that he gave a shit, he told himself; but there was a connection with what Speed was doing and Parker's death.

A foreign imprint was stamped on Miami International Airport. It seemed it belonged in South America instead of South Florida. He had never been to Miami, and it was all new and strange to him. When he closed his eyes, his senses were swamped with bits of unfamiliar languages and smells. A banner hung from the ceiling, declaring Crossroads of the Caribbean, and

people bustled past him wearing every shade of skin tone there must be. He took his time, looking for a sign pointing to Security so he could retrieve his weapon.

He found the door and a room with a desk and two plastic chairs. Two Latin-looking men were talking in either Spanish or Puerto Rican when he walked in. They stopped and looked up. A white guy sat across the room against the wall, his chair tilted back. He smoked a cigarette and squinted through the smoke at Morrow.

"I checked my weapon through from Savannah," he said, wondering if any of them understood.

"You James Morrow?" one sitting behind the desk asked.

"Right. I'm supposed to meet a representative of Miami PD. That you?"

The guy pointed at the other Latino. The Latino extended his hand without getting up. "Hola. Hernando Rivera. Miami PD, at your service." He gave Morrow a little smile.

"Hey." Morrow grasped Rivera's hand and gave a firm shake.

Rivera was probably five-five or six with jet black hair, clean shaven, and his skin was universal Latino, cocoa brown.

The security officer slid Morrow's weapon across the desk, then his box of shells--thirty-eights with lead tips backed by a brass collar. Morrow opened both the box and the cylinder of his pistol and slipped in six rounds. Then he snapped the cylinder in place and fitted the weapon in his armpit holster. He popped the lid on his briefcase and set the box of shells in, at the same time picking up a piece of paper in a file. He showed it to Rivera. "This guy was asking around for Parker the same night he was murdered."

He floated the composite across the desk. Rivera studied it, then held it out to the white guy across the room. "My partner, Henry Pace."

Pace walked over and took the composite from Rivera.

“He’s our only connection so far,” Morrow went on.

“You know him?” Rivera asked his partner.

“Never seen him before,” Henry Pace said.

“Me, neither,” Rivera said. He looked toward Morrow. “You want to look through the mug shots?”

Morrow slumped onto a plastic chair. “Naw, I’m too tired. The flight was a bitch. I need to find a room.”

“We’ll take you to Little Havana. It ain’t too crowded,” Pace said, obviously teasing.

“You better stay outta there, Compadre. They eat gringos for breakfast.” Rivera squinted through cigarette smoke.

Morrow pushed another picture across the desk. Pace picked it up, studied it, and then handed it to Rivera, shaking his head.

Rivera shrugged. “Nope. Ain’t seen him, bro. He looks uptown. What’s the rap?”

“Name’s Rick Speed. He’s a lawyer in Savannah. Last week he flew here with a girl. I got a hunch he’s involved with the people who snuffed Parker and another lawyer in Savannah. They’re all connected. It just can’t be coincidental. Speed’s up to something. I don’t know what. But I’m going to nail him this time, even if it kills me. I almost had Speed a few years back on a bribery charge. It fell through.”

Rivera stood up and stretched. He fished a card out of his shirt pocket and handed it to Morrow. “You’ll need this.”

Morrow looked at the identification card and the large blue letters printed on it, declaring he was a Special Liaison Officer, Miami Police Department. He pocketed it.

“Let’s find you a place to stay,” Pace said, heading for the door.

* * *

Two hours later, Morrow, Pace and Rivera sat in the squad room of the South Beach precinct. Morrow belched for the third time in the last ten minutes and made a face. "I'm not going to make it on the food down here. I haven't ever tasted anything so spicy."

"You'll get used to it," Pace said.

Morrow closed the mug book. "They all look alike now."

"How about putting these pictures on the wire?" Rivera asked.

Henry Pace parked the doughnut he was eating, wiped his mouth and dusted his hands. "It's worth a try. I'll put them all around. Lauderdale, Pompano, Palm Beach, Hollywood . . . anywhere else?"

"Let's give them to all divisions, too," Rivera suggested.

Pace picked up the phone, talked for a second, and put it back. "Betty'll send them out." He pushed the box of doughnuts toward Morrow and motioned for him to take one.

"OK, I give up." Morrow shrugged his shoulders in defeat. "Maybe it'll settle my stomach."

Pace walked away with copies of the composite and photograph in his hand.

Rivera and Morrow finished off half the doughnuts while Pace was gone. Pace returned carrying drinks. He handed Morrow a Coke. "How long you staying in Miami, Jim?"

"As long as it takes," Morrow said. "I'm going to nail the guy that killed Parker and Thompson. I know Speed's involved in all of this somehow, and I'm going to find out how."

The door swung open, and a large man pushed through, a badge pinned to his breast pocket. His neck escaped from the top of his unbuttoned shirt and loose tie. His head was covered with a mass of unruly white hair packed in tight curls. A used cigar stubbed from the corner of his

mouth.

“You guys helping out?” he asked, motioning toward Pace and Rivera.

“Sure, Chief,” both detectives said in unison.

Morrow stood.

“They helping you?” the chief of detectives asked him.

“Yes sir. We’re putting the pictures on the wire now.”

The chief lit a stub of a cigar. “Pass them around Vice.”

“Already,” Rivera said.

The chief walked on through the room, papers swirling off the desks as he passed.

“A regular hurricane,” Pace said.

The phone rang. Rivera picked it up.

“Hola. Si . . . come on up.” He put the phone down, smiling. “Sanders knows the composite.

He’s on his way up.”

A wave of relief passed through Morrow and then the feeling climbed to full excitement. This might be the first break in Parker’s murder case.

* * *

“Eddie Sanders,” the man said five minutes later, extending his hand to James Morrow.

Morrow gripped his hand. Sanders wore a floral print shirt that flapped loose as he walked.

A straw boater hung over his eyes and the first two fingers of his right hand were stained yellow from the cigarette lodged between them.

Sanders transferred the cigarette to his lips. “I had a contact. Might be your man in the composite.”

“You got a name?” Rivera asked.

Sanders adjusted his hat, “Naw. I’m not even sure about the face. But it looks familiar as hell.”

“Can you get him again?” Morrow asked.

Sanders bared his brown-stained teeth. “Jest so happens, I’m to meet him tomorrow. We got a deal supposed to go down. I’m buying a key. You go along, see if you can ID him.”

Rivera slapped Morrow on the back. “Damn, we g-o-o-o-d!” drawing out the word, and then giving a short laugh.

Morrow, Rivera, Pace and Sanders sat hunched around the desk for the rest of the afternoon, smoking, drinking coffee and setting the plan in motion. They made all the pieces fit and made sure all contingencies were covered.

“Getting set to bust some ass,” as Sanders said.

CHAPTER 17

Eighteen miles across Miami, Rick stood at a sliding glass door and watched a boatful of kids maneuver on a canal behind the house where he was staying with Constanzia. The canal was forty feet from the patio he looked across, and the water reflected a greenish-blue sky and two white seagulls.

He slid the door open and plopped in a chair, leaned back and felt the sun warm his face. They had done nothing except stay around Constanzia's house for the past eight days, and it was getting boring. You could snort only so much coke, and fooling around got tiresome when your elbows and knees were sheet burned. *I need something to happen*, he thought. *I'm getting nowhere. Hell, I don't even have a plan.*

"Why don't I fix a Slippery Nipple?" Constanzia asked from the door, intruding upon his thoughts.

"Make it two." He held up two fingers.

She returned with two liqueur glasses, each topped with tan Irish Creme whiskey resting on clear butterscotch schnapps. Rick sipped, sucking the schnapps beneath the creme.

She held out a mirror to him with four lines of cocaine, offering him a straw at the same

time. He snorted one line, thinking that he shouldn't; but what the hell, he was on vacation.

She sat on the lounge next to him, inhaled the other three lines and leaned back, rubbing her nose, eyes half closed.

"I think we're getting too regular with that," he said, motioning toward the mirror.

"Makes me forget."

"Forget what?"

"Lots of things. Hector. The money. How I'm going to die."

She tucked her feet under her, eyes still closed. Her hair curled around the oval of her face. Her lips parted.

"Getting melodramatic?" he asked.

She opened her eyes and dropped her chin in his direction. "We've been here a week and you haven't even talked to Hector yet. We can't play house and snort forever. You gotta get off your ass."

Rick got up and slammed the door open and went into the kitchen. What the hell was she laying this all on him for? She's the one that wants to lie around and suck up the coke all the time. Besides, he needed more time to think, come up with a plan to get the money to Hector and stay alive at the same time. Find a way to nail Ramon and Earl Lee with Billy's murder and stay alive at the same time. Mainly, to stay alive.

He returned carrying a portable phone, jerked the antenna up and glared at her.

"So, what's the number?" he snapped.

He punched the numbers as she said them.

After a pause, he spoke. "Rick Speed. I'd like to speak to Mr. Affianta."

Rick listened, then depressed the button and laid the phone down. "He's busy. He'll call back."

He felt his anger subsiding. He realized he was stupid for getting mad. There was no use

getting in a hurry. A lot had to happen at the right time to make each part of this puzzle work. His best bet was to keep calm, quiet, and just let things happen until he could decipher the most advantageous way to proceed.

Constanzia reached over and touched his cheek as he sat next to her.

She pulled him to the lounge chair, then pushed him back and straddled him, opening her housecoat. She was naked underneath.

Rick had a mild panic attack, looking around for the kids on the boat. "Hey! Someone will see."

"They can't see." She rubbed him, covering them with the housecoat.

Then the phone rang. She frowned, pouted her bottom lip and sat back, handing it to him.

"Señor Speed?" Hector asked.

"Yes, sir. Thanks for calling me back."

"De nada. I'm glad you called. I was going to call you anyway. I have a client for you, if you are interested."

Rick raised his eyebrows and looked at Constanzia. "A client?" he asked.

"Si. A friend of mine is the executive officer of the FCCL--the Free Cuba of Castro League. A political organization. He needs a lawyer and I recommended you."

"Recommended me?" Rick asked, taken completely unaware. Questions bounded around in his head and he wondered how he could use this development in his as yet, undefined master plan.

"Mr. Las Palmas. His organization is negotiating to buy a ship in New Orleans. He needs someone to look over the contract and close the deal. Are you interested?"

"Sure, sure," Rick stumbled on.

"Good!" Hector nearly shouted. "Meet me at Reflections at three this afternoon. We'll have lunch, then I'll take you to meet your client. Constanzia knows the place." Then he was gone, the

phone dead in Rick's hand.

"Well?" Constanzia asked, looking at him.

Rick repeated the conversation for her.

"He didn't mention money."

"He will."

* * *

After the car was parked, Rick and Constanzia entered the restaurant. It was three minutes to three. Light reflected off the octagonal glass enclosure of the restaurant, subduing the interior with a diffused golden sheen. Rick and Constanzia passed tables decorated with white linen, crystal glasses, sparkling silverware and mauve napkins. Biscayne Bay served as a backdrop, accentuated with streamers of whitecaps. Huge white clouds hung over the blue margin of the Atlantic Ocean. Large, leafy plants served as dividers, making each table semiprivate. Constanzia wound her way through the nearly empty dining room toward Hector. Rick followed.

Hector sat at a horseshoe booth. All other tables within twenty feet were empty. Two large Latin men were standing nearby, wearing look-alike suits and red power ties and blocking each aisle leading to Hector's table. They moved when Constanzia and Rick headed for the table.

Hector hugged Constanzia, giving her a peck on the cheek. He extended his hand to Rick.

"Glad to meet you, Señor Speed. Please, have a seat."

Constanzia nervously squeezed Rick's hand under the table as they sat.

Hector talked about the weather, the Miami Dolphins and Constanzia's house; telling Rick that she was just three houses down from where Meyer Lansky--the Mafia's finance manager--used to live.

Hector asked if Rick was enjoying his vacation. “You need something, let me know,” Hector offered. Then he took the menu from the white-jacketed waiter and ordered stuffed flounder for everyone, failing to ask what they preferred.

As the waiter left, Hector leaned toward Rick, “Where’s the money, Compadre?”

Rick sipped his water, trying to cover his shock at the frontal attack. He took his time answering. “I don’t know yet.”

Hector surveyed the room, also taking his time. Then, he picked up his water and took a sip, mirroring Rick’s movements. It was unsettling.

“Well, you’ve had a week. I figured you might need a little vacation, so I didn’t press you. But things must get moving. Do you have any ideas?” Hector asked.

“I’ve contacted Billy’s office. The firm says there’re no funds on deposit. The money should’ve been placed into a trust account. There should be a record.”

“Unless he intended to keep the money,” Constanzia said.

Hector frowned at her.

Rick looked from Constanzia to Hector. “It would surprise me. But, I know it looks that way.”

“So where is it?” Hector asked.

“Probably in his house somewhere . . . or maybe in a locker or storage shed.” Rick shrugged. “I really don’t know yet.” He glanced down and took another sip of water, noticing his hands trembling.

“What are you going to do, Señor Speed?” Hector asked, leaning forward.

“Nose around. Check out his locker at the club. If all else fails, we’ll have to file a claim in his probate. But you said that was a last resort and I agree.”

Hector carefully inserted a cigarette into an ivory holder, and then lighted it. He drew on the cigarette and blew the smoke across the table at Rick.

Rick didn't move.

"Do you already have the money, Señor Speed?"

Rick swallowed, picked up his water glass, and sipped again. "If I had it, you would have it."

"Mr. Thompson said you had it."

"What did he say, exactly?"

Hector sucked on the cigarette holder. "He said your name."

"What was he asked?"

"Where the money was."

Rick leaned back. He picked up his napkin and wiped his mouth. Then, he leaned forward, as if to whisper.

"If I did have it, I'm not dumb enough to think that you would let me live to spend it."

Hector neatly folded the napkin. "Si, you are right."

"I am implicated because my friend said my name, before he . . . fell. I can't do anything about that. I can find the money. If I do, I'll probably keep on breathing. If I don't, I won't collect Social Security. You have nothing to lose by letting me try. I die, you lose."

"Si, Señor Speed. You make sense. But I'm not a patient man. I like quick results. That money is worthless unless I can put it to work. The longer it's gone, the less important it is. Comprende?"

Rick suppressed a sigh. He knew he had won. He also knew that Hector probably didn't kill Billy, but he had caused it, which made him just as guilty. He'd pay for that.

"Two weeks?" Rick asked.

"Two weeks. One week has already gone."

"Two more weeks then?"

Hector chortled, "You have a pair of Grande Bolas, señor."

“You are a reasonable man, Mr. Affianta.”

Hector motioned to the waiter and signed the check. “Now, we’ll meet my friends.” He stood and motioned to the two Latinos. They moved toward the door.

“How long will the work on this contract take?”

“A day, or two.” Hector flipped his hand.

“Does it come off my two weeks?”

Hector was having fun. “Two weeks and a day then.”

Rick held up two fingers, “Two days?”

Hector happily agreed, slapping Rick on the back as they walked to the door and the waiting limousine.

Rick looked around for Constanzia, but she was gone.

CHAPTER 18

The air conditioner of Hector's light blue Cadillac spewed cool air into the back seat and all around them. Even so, Rick was still hot. The temperature in the car didn't make Rick sweat. It was fear--fear real enough to leave a copper taste in his mouth, like he'd been sucking on a penny.

He didn't know if this was Hector's way of taking him out--killing him--or if he really was going to meet a client, as Hector said. It worried him that Constanzia had disappeared at the restaurant and hadn't come with them.

Hector had spoken only once since they got in the car, that was when he handed Rick two thousand dollars in cash and told him to count it. Rick didn't bother. He stuffed it into his pocket instead. Of course, Rick thought, giving me the money could simply be to put me at ease. Hector could always take it back after I'm dead.

The car turned off the highway onto a dirt road. Rick's apprehension rose, he was ready to open the door, jump out of the moving car and if able, run like hell. There was a sign on a post beside the entrance that said Private. A minute later, much to his relief, Rick saw a dark tarmac strip in front of the car, heat waves visible as streamers above it. A Lear jet was parked on a concrete apron beside a gas pump. The asphalt runway stretched behind it. Three men in sport

shirts and slacks hustled around the jet.

Finally, Hector spoke. "You know Castro?"

"Yea. President of Cuba . . . dictator. Communist. Not much else. Just what I read, I guess."

Rick wasn't sure he was able to conceal the relief that was rushing over him.

"He's an escalador! A thief!" Hector shouted. Rick flinched at the unexpected outburst. "He is a ladron de poca monta--a thief who sneaks in the night. He seduced the peasants, sold Cuba to Russia and raped our heritage." His voice gradually losing volume.

Rick agreed, but decided to keep his mouth shut, so he just dipped his head.

Hector stared morosely out the window as the car stopped. They got out and Hector continued.

"Since the Bay of Pigs disaster, we Cubans have wished the removal of Castro." His voice returning to normal amplitude, almost as if giving instructions. "Now we are doing something about it. The FCCL will be the libertador of Cuba. Through the work of many fine and generous men, we will kick Castro out of Cuba. Now is the time. The country is bankrupt. There is no food on the shelves of stores. The government gives out only four pounds of rice per month for each person. The people are ready for democracy, and the FCCL will give it to them. I believe that."

Rick was still at a loss for a relevant comment.

Hector motioned and guided Rick toward the Lear. "I help them. The two thousand is a down payment on your fee. Do a good job for these people, and you'll get another three thousand."

Rick tried to smile, the fear receding distantly, his hands no longer sweating and a faint sense of elation creeping into his mind. Five grand for a contract. That was a third of what he had made last year and he would make it in a day, maybe two days. He smiled to himself. He could get used to a job like this.

Hector intruded upon his thoughts. "Advise them. They are honorable people. They need our

help.”

Rick said he would, as they got to the steps of the jet. Hector waved toward Rick and a chocolate-colored man scrambled down the steps and handed Rick a briefcase.

Hector went on. “The Organizacion is buying a ship in Louisiana. You will review the contract on your way. De una volada, a short flight. When you arrive, there will be a negotiation. The price is already set. We need you to negotiate the delivery date. Make it as soon as possible. Push them hard. As a last card, tell them that if they can deliver it in twenty days, we will pay in cash.”

Hector slapped Rick on the shoulder and motioned for the black man. “Raphael will give you the details.”

Hector turned as a blue Chevrolet pulled to a stop. A white man got out. “Ah,” he spoke to Rick, “our consultant.”

The man looked to be in his late fifties, clad in a rumpled white linen suit and a blue tie. His hair was completely gray and windblown, thinning on top. His face sagged around the jowls and heavy lines hung under his eyes. His nose had the broken veins of a heavy drinker.

The man extended his hand to Rick. “Peter Jensen. Pleased to meet you, Mr. Speed.”

The turbines started, and Hector motioned them onto the jet. Rick and Jensen followed Raphael up the steps. The jet started rolling before they got into their seats, the door slammed shut, and the cabin air blew cool on Rick’s face as he ducked into a window seat.

Jensen sat across the aisle from Rick, snapped his seat belt, and leaned back, eyes closed. Rick fastened his seat belt and the jet screamed down the runway and leapt into the air.

* * *

“Want another drink?” Raphael asked.

Rick handed him an empty glass. “No, thanks.” He shuffled the papers, put them in page-number order, and slipped them into the briefcase. It had taken him thirty minutes to go over the contract, and he hadn’t found anything out of the ordinary. It was a simple sales contract with the delivery date left blank.

He stretched. “How much longer?”

Raphael looked at his watch. “Fifteen minutes.”

“When was the last marine survey on the ship?”

Raphael shrugged. “Mr. Pasos will know. He’ll meet us.”

Although they had followed the sun since their takeoff from Miami, they were losing the race. The sun had dipped below the horizon thirty minutes before and the ground was shaded a dark gray. Rick glanced out the window. Pinpoints of light in a cluster halfway to the horizon stood out against the black backdrop of earth and sky. Rick pointed.

“New Orleans,” Raphael said over his shoulder as he went up front.

Rick swallowed, clearing his ears as the aircraft descended. He and Jensen hadn’t spoken since takeoff. Jensen had stared out the window and napped off and on.

“What do you consult on?” Rick asked, being more polite than anything else.

Jensen looked around and yawned, covering his mouth. “Current events, political situations. Chaos theory and its application to political developments. I try to predict the effect of current events onto known future trends, that sort of thing. In fact, I predicted the current exodus of Cuban migrants almost to the day.”

“Way over my head. I’m just a garden variety attorney.”

Jensen looked at him again. “Born Richard J. Speed III in Savannah, Georgia, twenty-nine years ago.” His voice sounding bored. Stating the words matter-of-factly. “Father, Richard J. Speed,

II. Mother, the former Bonnie Metcalf. Both parents died in an automobile accident two years ago. Grandfather, Richard J. Speed of Speed Shipping.” Jensen smirking slightly went on. “Investigated by the grand jury concerning a bribery charge. Cleared. Victim of the GBI and an overzealous investigator named James Morrow.” He settled into the seat and leaned his head back. “Of course, Savannah being the little-big town it is, once a black eye, always a black eye. Into your own practice now.” He sighed and closed his eyes.

Rick looked at him, his lips tight and his brow furrowed. “How do you know so much about me? And why?” he asked, feeling the beginnings of anger welling up, indignant that someone had been prying into his life, again.

Jensen rolled his head toward Rick and opened his eyes. “Nothing personal. Mr. Affianta likes to know who works for him is all. We run background checks on everybody.”

Rick didn’t know what to say, so he kept quiet and fought to keep his anger under control.

Jensen rolled his head back toward the window. “You passed.”

* * *

Fifteen minutes later, Rick stepped from the steps of the jet onto the tarmac. Two long buildings sat a few hundred feet away, blending into the pitch black, alive with bustling, shadowy figures. The only light he could see appeared briefly when a door on the closest building opened and closed.

The jet’s engines wound down. A covered Hertz rental truck skidded to a stop and backed to the steps, almost hitting Rick as he skittered out of the way.

The rear door of the truck rolled up with a clatter. Men jumped off and formed a line from the rear of the truck to the cargo door of the jet. Square boxes were passed out of the jet, along the

human chain and into the truck.

Raphael touched Rick on the arm. "Venga," he motioned.

Rick followed him to the closest building, looking around for Jensen and seeing a flash of his white linen suit, standing in the doorway of the jet. Subdued light framed Raphael as he pushed through a door. Rick followed, carrying the briefcase.

The building smelled of oil and Cosmoline. Stacked wooden boxes filled the center of the room. Raphael greeted a short black man with slicked-back, pomaded hair and motioned Rick over to them.

Rick stood next to Raphael as the man popped the lid off a box.

In a dark corner of the building where no one could see, there was the sound of a camera shutter. One click, quietly, lost in the noise.

Rick looked around, a perplexed look on his face. All the activity was confusing. He didn't understand what this had to do with the purchase of the ship and the delivery date.

The short black man hefted an Army issue M-16 and handed it past Rick to Raphael. Rick's eyes followed the weapon.

In the darkness across the warehouse, another click.

Raphael hefted it, racked the bolt and put it back into the box. Four men moved out of the shadows, each grabbing an end of a box.

It had only taken thirty seconds. Rick watched, still confused, his brow furrowed, consternation growing, getting a feeling that he was in the wrong place at the right time.

Click, again.

Rick jumped as an overhead door rattled open and the Hertz truck backed in. Raphael and the black man jumped into the back of the truck as it rolled to a stop, the rear bumper nearly touching Rick's leg. Rick's eyes followed the two men as they moved in the truck's cavern. He

looked over his shoulder, seeing more men grabbing boxes and leaving, then back to Raphael and the black man in the truck.

The man pointed to a box and motioned to Raphael, who pulled it out and placed it in front of him.

The man squatted, opened the box, took out a plastic bag, cut a slit and withdrew a small hill of white powder on a knife blade. With his other hand, he pulled a vial from his pocket, unstoppered it, and tapped the powder in. He shook it and inspected it. Then he removed another small hill of powder from the bag and inhaled it.

Rick stood at the back of the truck, shuffling his feet and finally realizing that he was in the middle of a drug deal. He expected the cops to bust through the door at any time. He felt his face flush and a burning anger rising in his chest once again. Hector hadn't said anything about this. What the hell was going on? Nobody was talking about the purchase of a ship. They were ignoring him and he was just standing here, out of control, a spectator.

Click.

Raphael and his companion dropped to the ground as the door of the Hertz truck clanked shut and it moved quickly out of the building. The short man laid his hand on Rick's shoulder and gave a thumbs up to Raphael. Rick looked at the man's hand, then at Raphael, still not believing that he was in the middle of this mess. Less than three minutes had passed.

Rick and the two men were framed in the dim glow of an overhead bulb.

Click.

Rick heard a car start, then a few seconds later the jet's turbines whined, built to a roar then lessened, moving away.

Raphael motioned Rick to follow him as a black Buick backed into the building. Raphael guided Rick into the back seat first, and then followed.

Click.

The car carrying Rick and Raphael moved out of the building and they rode through a gate, and then turned onto a paved road. Raphael looked at his watch.

“Seis minuto. Six minutes. In and out. Zip, zip. Too fast to see.” Raphael’s white teeth gleamed in the shadows.

Rick swallowed, his mouth dry and cottony. “I thought we were here on legal business?” he snapped, letting the rising anger show through. “I don’t appreciate being involved in this crap! You should have told me!”

Raphael was obviously amused. “Es non importante.”

“It may not be important to you, but it is to me. I came here on legal business.”

Raphael’s face was full of amusement. “It’s just an errand. Now we go to the hotel and tomorrow morning you do your work on the ship. Don’t worry. Everything’s fine.”

* * *

“What do you mean you can’t talk about it?” Rick heard Constanzia ask through the receiver.

“Just what I said. I can’t discuss it now. I’ll tell you when I get back.”

“When will that be?”

“Tomorrow. I can wrap up negotiations today. The contract’s final. I’ve worked straight through for the last six hours. You just tell Hector I want to see him as soon as I get back.”

There was a sharp rap on the door. “They’re here. I’ve got to go.”

“I miss you,” she said.

“Me too. Bye.”

Rick opened the door to Raphael and three men in business suits. Raphael introduced the

men. They shook hands and Rick directed them to the conference table in the center of the room. He notched his tie and spread copies of the contract across the table. The men sat and started reading.

CHAPTER 19

Two days after he'd left Miami, Rick dropped his clothes bag on the living room floor of Constanzia's house and silently slid the glass door open. He crept across the patio to the lounge chair where Constanzia lay on her stomach, naked except for a small towel over her rear. He kissed her neck and felt the warmth from the sun.

She turned over and wrapped her arms around him. "I'm glad you're back."

"Prove it," he whispered.

They went into the house, arm in arm. Constanzia led him to the bedroom, dropped the

towel to the floor and slipped her arms around his neck, pressing her naked body against him.

He fumbled with the buttons on his shirt, popping one off.

The doorbell rang.

“Shit,” he said.

“Let it ring.”

He pushed his shirt back into his pants as he went to the door.

He opened it. Ramon and Earl Lee pushed past. Ramon surveyed the living room. Earl Lee leaned against the closed door with his fingers hooked into the top of his belt, a toothpick hanging from the corner of his mouth.

“Have a good trip?” Earl Lee asked.

“Get me a beer,” Ramon said.

Rick looked from one to the other.

“Get me a beer!” Ramon said, louder.

Constanzia came through the door from the bedroom, wrapping a housecoat around herself. “I’ll get it.”

“Hey, Connie, you fooling around with Señor Speedo?” Earl Lee hollered. “Hey, Speedo, she a good lay?”

“Screw you,” Rick said.

Earl Lee’s eyes went cold, but he still smiled. The toothpick bobbed a couple of times.

Ramon sat and lifted his feet onto the coffee table. “Shut up,” He motioned Rick to sit in the chair across from him. Rick sat carefully, watching Ramon.

“Mr. A’s got some work for you.”

“Not interested. The last time he had work, it involved illegal activity. I’m not interested in illegal activity.” He looked Ramon in the eyes. “You tell him that.”

Ramon leaned forward, pulled an envelope from his pocket and threw it to Rick.

"The rest of your money for the contract job."

"No one told me about drugs and guns!" Rick raised his voice. He halfway rose out of the chair.

Ramon's lips twitched. Rick thought this must be some outward sign of amusement, a smile maybe. Earl Lee grinned. There was no doubt that he was amused.

"What? Snorting blow ain't illegal?" Earl Lee asked, leaning over the table. "Shit, man, you in the middle of it; laying around with Connie; we supplying you with the blow; taking it easy." He paused, straightening. "Too late." He mouthed the words slowly, putting emphasis on the words. "Too late for you, my man. You already in the snow zone. You can't go back."

Ramón's eyes narrowing to slits. "You're going to run an errand with Earl Lee tomorrow,"

"Wrong!" Rick shouted as he stood up. "Wrong! I'm not doing anything with either of you. I'm not doing anything for Hector. I got two weeks to find the money and get it to Hector, and that's all I'm going to do. Nothing else! You tell Hector, or better yet, I'll tell him." Rick was getting up and reaching for the phone.

Ramon pulled a chrome-plated pistol from behind his back and waved it at Rick. "Sit." Rick looked at the gun and sat.

Constanzia brushed by Rick's chair, her housecoat held tightly around her. She handed Ramon a Miller Lite.

Ramon held the bottle up and looked at it. "You don't have any real beer?"

"That's it," she said.

Earl Lee sat on the arm of the couch. "We gotta see someone about another contract tomorrow." He smirked at Rick.

"I'm busy."

“Ray, my man. Make Mr. Speedo here un-busy, OK?”

Ramon sat up, took another envelope out of his jacket and opened it. He took out a stack of pictures and looked at them. His lips twitched again.

“Look at these,” he motioned to Rick.

Rick scooted his chair closer to the coffee table.

Ramon laid a photo on the table facing Rick.

It showed Rick and two other men, the background completely black. He was between Raphael and the short black man he had met near New Orleans, looking into a box with the words Aberdeen Munitions Depot, Property of the U.S. Army stenciled on its side.

In the next picture, it appeared as if an M-16 automatic rifle was being passed to him.

Ramon flipped another picture on top of the pile. Rick stared at himself with the two men as the boxes were being carried away.

Earl Lee giggled. Ramon twitched his lips.

Rick stood framed next to Raphael; the other man squatted in the back of a van with a glass vial and a white bag in his hands.

Ramon flipped another one.

The man had his hand on Rick’s shoulder in a comradely gesture giving the thumbs up sign, as the van with large black Hertz letters drove away.

Ramon laid the last photo on the pile.

It showed Rick ducking his head and getting into the black Buick with Raphael holding the door for him.

Ramon leaned over, putting his face right into Rick’s.

“As Earl Lee said, you’re in the snow zone.” His voice soft and low. “And you got trouble.”

Rick was frozen in place, his mouth moving but nothing coming out. He could hear a faint

whining start deep in his ears. A faint whistle; like the subconscious sound of a computers hard-drive. Fading, then coming back stronger.

Ramon gathered the pictures and slipped them into the envelope. Constanzia sat quietly, biting the cuticle on her first finger.

“You’re going with Earl Lee tomorrow,” Ramon continued. “He need’s some help. You’re going to help.”

Rick sat back in the chair. “Listen! I’m a lawyer! I can be more help to Hector doing what I know how to do. If I’m involved in anything illegal, I lose my license. Then I’m no good to Hector.” He was trying to sound reasonable and coherent. His mind was swimming with the possibilities and consequences that could spring from those pictures. How in the hell would he explain them? He could make every excuse in the world and they’d all sound phony.

When he had thought about what he was going to do about Hector and the money, it had never entered his mind that he would not be in control of the situation. He hadn’t realized that he could get so far over the line that he might not be able to get back. Now, it was staring him in the face. A stack of rationally unexplainable photographs was going to be their control over him.

Earl Lee bent over. “You do as we say or these pictures go to Miami Vice or the Feds, and you’ll go down the tubes, big time.” He was obviously enjoying the position Rick was in.

Rick swallowed hard. “They don’t prove a thing.” But he knew his voice sounded weak.

“Maybe. Maybe, not. Course, it’ll sure be funny as hell to hear you explain how come you’re so friendly with old Le-Roy Watkins.” Earl Lee chortled. “He’s that little colored man with his hand on your shoulder, real friendly like.”

“So what?” Rick asked.

“Le-Roy? Why old Le-Roy is only the best-known Snowman in Metairie, Louisiana, that’s all. Now, why would you be seeing Le-Roy for anything? Real blue blood Savannah lawyer like you.

Now, what business you got with old Le-Roy?” Earl Lee slapped his hands on his legs and hooted.

Rick ran his hands through his hair and licked his lips. He had to have time to think this out and they weren’t giving him any.

“So, tomorrow . . . Earl Lee’ll come by about four. You be ready.” Ramon stood. “It’s all legal. You’re right, you’re a lawyer. Hector can use you. No use getting into anymore trouble.”

He picked up the Miller Lite and guzzled it.

Earl Lee moved toward the door as Ramon set the bottle on the coffee table and burped. Then Ramon walked toward the door, stopped halfway and turned toward Rick. “Keep these.” He threw the manila envelope in Ricks lap. “You get any ideas, just look at them. Consider them insurance for our side. You get the urge to do anything stupid, look at them.”

As soon as the door closed, Rick jumped up. He paced the room. He kicked the coffee table, splintering one of its legs. He couldn’t believe this shit! Everything he did, things got worse! Constanzia disappeared into the bedroom as he stalked around the room.

* * *

Early next morning, Rick stood at the kitchen sink, feeling the water running from the faucet, waiting for it to get cold enough to drink.

The sun was a bright orange globe low on the horizon casting shadows on the houses across the canal. He hadn’t slept well, tossing and turning most of the night. He’d drop off and dream, then he’d jump awake. He’d go back to sleep and be surrounded by mountains of white powder, trying to run up one, his feet sinking and making him move in slow motion. Then the top of the mountain would crumble and start falling on him and he’d jump awake again. Finally, when the digital clock showed it was 5:30, he had gotten out of bed and quietly closed the bedroom door,

leaving Constanzia asleep on her side of the bed.

He dropped two Alka-Seltzers into a glass and filled it, listening to the fizzing and popping, finding the distraction comforting.

Earl Lee was right. Maybe he could explain the pictures to cops who knew him, but he'd never be able to explain them to Miami cops or the Feds.

"What?" Constanzia asked as she breezed into the kitchen, wrapping her housecoat around her.

"Nothing."

She picked up the pack of bills he had thrown on the counter earlier. "Don't you want this?" She riffled through the bills.

"You can have it."

"All of it? You kidding?"

Rick leaned against the counter.

"When I worked for Judge Sims, I made twenty-five thousand a year. On my own, I've made less. On this deal, I made twenty percent of a year's pay in two days."

"Maybe you've been in the wrong business." She counted the money, laying it out on the counter.

"I've never broken the law."

"Sure you have. Everybody has." She tousled his hair, moved against him and opened the housecoat.

He ran his hands over her slim hips and kissed her neck. The troubles that bothered him all night ran away.

He circled his hands around her waist. "I'm not interested in going to jail." His hands slipped from her waist and he smoothed the two perfectly hemispheric globes of her fanny.

“Don’t get caught.” She started to breath more heavily. He realized he wasn’t really interested in the conversation. He pulled her against him.

She pushed away. “I’ve got to run an errand.”

He grabbed her again. “The errand can wait.” He lifted her right leg to his waist, pushing her against the counter.

She gasped and raised her other leg, wrapping them both around his waist.

His perceived problems were no longer on his mind. They were completely hidden away as he lost himself in the physical pleasure of her body.

CHAPTER 20

James Morrow pushed through the door into the squad room. Smoke hung in abstract swirls like spring clouds in a high wind. Henry Pace stood by the window, fanning the drifting smoke. Hernando Rivera crouched on a chair, lighting a cigarette. Eddie Sanders flipped through photos at the desk.

“These are the players,” Sanders said, pointing to a surveillance photo of two men standing in front of the El Toro Cafe, obviously taken with a telephoto lens. “This skinny white boy is the one we got the deal with. We don’t know this other guy, but they’re probably connected.”

Morrow looked at the photo. “These two guys look familiar. I believe that I may have seen them both in Savannah, talking to Speed. The skinny one here could be the one in the composite. It’s close, but I still don’t know.”

“We’ll find out when we meet him for the buy. As soon as he gets the money and gives up the snow, you and Pace move in,” Sanders said.

Rivera picked it up. “The rest of the squad will have the street-level exits blocked. I’ll be at the pay exit, and we’ll have plain units at the others, just in case he tries to bust out.”

The door to the squad room burst open, and the Chief of Detectives strode in, stopping

behind the lectern. He didn't waste any time. "Is everyone up to speed?" he asked. "Sanders will be the officer in charge on this mission. Rivera, Pace and four undercovers will provide backup. Morrow, you can go along. If this guy is the perp on your murder, he won't go down easy. The only way you're going to take him is by force. Remember the poop and shoot rule. You'd better be shitting your pants before you hose anyone down."

The men eyed one another.

"Any questions?"

They shook their heads in unison.

"Good. Sanders," the chief pointed a cocked finger and strode out of the room. The door banged, rattling the glass as he left.

Sanders took over. "We'll meet the moles on site. Jim, you stick by Henry. Let's go!"

* * *

The four men squatted in the back of the van, knees and shoulders squeezed together. A bearded Hispanic sat in the front seat wearing a Hawaiian shirt and a baseball cap with a black X over the bill.

Sanders nodded to the Hispanic seated in front. "Officer Pervaso-Rodriguez is the contact."

Rodriguez touched the bill of his hat.

Sanders continued. "He's gonna meet on the second floor of the garage. We've got a man on every corner and one outside the elevator. Pace, you and Jim cover the stairwell. I want you on the second floor landing to help Rodriguez. When he hands over the buy, you get to him, instantly. Rodriguez's car is about thirty feet from the stairwell. It's a green Mazda convertible. Any questions?"

No one spoke.

“Good. Let’s go!”

Pace and Morrow walked across the street and into the front of the parking garage. They opened the stairwell door and took the steps two at a time.

On the second floor, Pace cracked the door, bent over and slipped a pack of gum between the door and the facing. The door closed again, leaving a half-inch gap.

Morrow stood on the handrail, reached up and worked the bulb loose and it winked out. The faint light from below filtered up, making them shadowy figures.

In the dim light, Pace checked his watch, and then put his eye to the crack of the door.

Morrow craned to see over his head, and Pace dropped to one knee. Morrow saw Rodriguez leaning on the rear of the green Mazda, both hands in his pockets.

Morrow saw a brown Thunderbird pulled up to the rear of Rodriguez’s car, trunk to trunk. Morrow could see two men in the front seat through the back glass.

Pace whispered to Morrow, “They’re here.”

Morrow saw the skinny white guy open the driver’s door. He stood, stretched, and said something to Rodriguez, while looking around the parking lot. He unwrapped a piece of gum, threw the wrapper on the floor and checked the cars up and down the line.

Morrow watched his eyes come to the stairwell door, and he jumped back, hoping he hadn’t been seen. Pace didn’t move.

Morrow eased to the door again. The skinny guy moved to the rear of the Mazda. Rodriguez opened the trunk and pointed.

“Hey, man. How’s it hanging?” Earl Lee asked.

Rodriguez just looked at him.

Earl Lee looked around again. “You got the money?”

“Si. You got the stuff?”

“I got the stuff.”

Rodriguez leaned into the trunk and opened the lid of a black briefcase.

Earl Lee looked around again, then bent over and riffled through the bills. He stood up. “OK. Looks good.” Then Earl Lee bent over and said something to the other man in the Thunderbird’s passenger seat. The man argued with him for a second, then opened the glove box and punched a button. The trunk lid popped up. Earl Lee and Rodriguez stepped to the trunk.

Morrow and Pace still squinted through the crack.

“Both trunk lids are up,” Pace said.

Morrow saw Rodriguez bend over the trunk of the Thunderbird then saw him straighten and wipe his hand on his back pocket.

Pace slammed the door open, running, drawing his gun, screaming, “Freeze! Police! You’re under arrest!”

Morrow ran two steps behind him, his gun drawn.

Earl Lee didn’t hesitate. His head snapped around, and he instantly grabbed Rodriguez by the front of his shirt. He bashed the top of his head into Rodriguez’s face, and then shoved him toward the running cops. He did a pirouette, grabbed the briefcase with the money out of the Mazda’s trunk, and threw it into the front seat of the Thunderbird. He followed it into the car. The door slammed closed, and he stomped on the accelerator. The Thunderbird screamed off, leaving billowing, bluish-white smoke, the trunk lid bobbing up and down.

Rodriguez smashed into Pace, his bloody face leaving a trail on Pace’s shirt as he slid to the floor. Pace fell to his knees, his arms full, breaking Rodriguez’s fall. Morrow slid to a stop, bumping into Pace’s back and falling to one knee.

Then Rodriguez was wobbling up, his nose bleeding. Pace helped him to the back of the

Mazda.

The Thunderbird skidded into a sharp turn at the end of the row of cars, wheels squealing. The engine roared as the car hurtled toward them.

Pace stood open-legged and pulled off three rounds at the car. They echoed loudly in the garage. Two bullets thunked into dead metal and the last one punched a hole in the windshield, just two inches above the hood and a little to the left of center of the driver's seat.

Morrow jerked Rodriguez behind the Mazda, trying to get out of the way of the two-thousand-pound motorized battering ram barreling at them.

The Thunderbird roared and swerved toward the Mazda and the three men.

Morrow popped his head above the trunk, aimed, and saw the astonished face of Rick Speed through the passenger-side window. He was too surprised to pull the trigger. Pace rolled onto the trunk of a blue Chevy parked next to the Mazda getting out of the way of the hurtling car.

The Thunderbird swept past, clipped the rear of the blue Chevy and knocked Pace off the trunk. He landed on his hands and knees, his gun clattering on the concrete and stopping against the tire of the car.

Morrow could see Speed looking through the rear window, his mouth open, yelling something. Morrow hesitated again, and then lowered his pistol.

"Goddamn it! Why didn't you shoot?" Pace shouted, getting to his feet and picking up his pistol.

Morrow couldn't find anything to say.

Tires were squealing on the down-ramp.

"You stay with him." Pace pointed to Rodriguez, and then sprinted toward the stairwell.

* * *

“What the fuck you doing!” Rick shouted.

The car careened around the turn on the down-ramp.

“I’m hit!” Earl Lee held his right shoulder and was trying to steer one-handed. “I’m hit, goddamn it!”

Rick saw blood seeping through Earl Lee’s shirt. Vomit rose in his throat. He swallowed hard as the car slid around the turn onto the first floor.

Rick saw a man run from the stairwell toward the car. The man stopped and pointed at them.

The windshield in front of Rick webbed into a million lines and he heard the whistling slugs rocket past his ear, then sounds of the shots above the roaring of the engine.

Earl Lee swerved the car toward the man. The man spun around, stumbled, and fell to his knees, then turned and pointed the gun toward the car. Rick could see the gun jerking in his hand, but nothing happened. Earl Lee laughed maniacally. “I got that fucker now!” he screamed around the laughter.

Rick heard a thump, and felt the car shudder as it drove over the man’s body. Then the car lurched toward a gate with a wooden barrier arm. A car was parked across the entrance at the curb.

Earl Lee stomped the gas pedal and their car tore through the barrier. Just as he cleared the wall of the building, Earl Lee twisted the steering wheel hard left. Their car clipped the side of the building and slammed into the front of the car blocking them, jumped over the curb, tore two long strips through the grass, topped a small mound, and soared through the air.

Rick felt it when the car left the ground. For a second it was almost quiet; only popping sounds, like firecrackers were distinct, then noises like hail on a tin roof peppering his side of the

car.

The car whomped onto the street, bottoming out its springs. Rick flew into the air, his head crashing into the roof. Roaring filled his ears, and blackness engulfed him.

* * *

Morrow and Rodriguez bent over Henry Pace's body. His head was crushed, all red stained; his face was twisted an odd way. His right palm was up, his left palm down, in an unnatural posture. The lower part of his body lay at an odd angle to the upper part.

Sanders and a uniformed cop ran through the splintered gate toward them. The unmarked car behind them sat twisted away from the curb, the front crushed, the left front tire sitting cocked at an angle.

Sanders shouted into his radio, "Code thirteen! Code thirteen! Get an ambulance in here! Officer down!"

Morrow knelt and felt for Pace's pulse. "He's dead." His voice was quietly subdued.

"Shit! Shit! Shit!" Sanders shouted, pacing in a circle.

Morrow stood up and wiped his bloody hands on his pants.

* * *

Rick opened his eyes. Earl Lee shook him with his left hand, shouted something, then shook him again. His right arm hung at his side. Rick shoved him away and staggered out the open door of the car. Leaning over, he heaved silently. He heard sirens faintly in the distance. Then it started swarming back into his head--the shots, the cop on the floor of the garage. Oh God! Earl Lee ran

over him, he screamed wordlessly. His mouth opened and closed, but nothing came out. He fell to his knees and vomited, tears obscuring his vision of the ground, his head swimming.

Earl Lee came around the car and pushed a briefcase into his hands, helping him to his feet. Rick swayed and leaned against the car.

Earl Lee shook him with one hand. "Take this! Come on! We gotta get outta here!" Then he turned and pulled Rick along as best he could.

They were in a train yard, walking alongside a brick building and following a dirt road when Rick started noticing his surroundings again. Rick stumbled along behind Earl Lee, following him. Unable to think clearly, he focused his concentration on the tremendous task of putting one foot in front of the other.

Earl Lee's coat hung over his right shoulder, and he carried a briefcase in his left hand. Rick watched small puffs of dust blossom each time Earl Lee's heels hit the ground. After a few minutes he was able to lift his head and look around.

Rick's head swam with thoughts. He tried to piece together the recent events. His neck hurt, his head hurt, his back hurt, and he felt sick again. He stopped and leaned over, head against the brick wall and waited. Earl Lee stopped at the corner of the building and shouted. Rick limped after him, trying to clear his head and get a coherent thought pattern working.

Once they were on the street, Earl Lee hailed a cab and Rick fell into the back seat. Earl Lee pushed him over and told the cab driver to take them to the Orange Bowl.

Rick couldn't turn his head; his neck hurt so much. His shoulders and back throbbed. The briefcase banged against his knee and fell to the floor.

Earl Lee pulled a cellular phone out of his coat pocket and awkwardly punched some numbers.

"Pick me up at Southwest Seventeenth and West Flagler," he said into the phone.

As the cab rolled to a stop in front of the main gate of the Orange Bowl, Earl Lee was moving, getting out of the cab with both cases clutched in his left hand. Rick followed again, stumbling along, still dazed.

The cab drove off. Earl Lee turned, looking him over.

“Get another cab. Go to Connie’s and stay put,” he handed him one of the briefcases. “Take this. You better make sure it’s kept safe.”

Rick watched him walk away, then flexed his neck, turning his head, trying to stop the swirling and dizziness. He looked for a cab, the briefcase heavy in his hand. A cab rushed at him and he held up his hand. He managed to fumble the door open and ease himself into the back seat.

* * *

Morrow stuffed his hands into his pockets and took deep breaths. The adrenaline rush was on. Shivering like an Eskimo in his underwear, he tried to calm himself by leaning against the wall, but his hands still bumped around inside his pockets. It was impossible to hold them still.

Sanders stopped in front of him. Rodriguez followed, trying to ease a cigarette between his swollen lips. Rivera watched Henry Pace’s covered body loaded into the ambulance by two med-techs.

“That son of a bitch swerved to hit Pace!” Sanders said.

“He meant to kill him,” Rivera said.

“Was he the same guy as the composite?” Sanders asked Morrow.

“I think so,” Morrow said.

“Anybody get a fix on the other guy?” Sanders raised his voice.

“That was Rick Speed.”

“Your lawyer?” Rivera asked.

Morrow’s mouth was dry and he couldn’t say any more words.

“Get a warrant out on both of them,” Sanders said. “Murder One. Get it on the tube! I want them! I want those sons a bitches now!”

* * *

Rick laid the briefcase on the kitchen table and sat.

Constanzia came in, yawning and stretching. “God! You look terrible.” She smoothed his hair back from his eyes.

Rick rubbed his neck and worked his shoulders. “Earl Lee ran over a cop. Tore the shit out of my neck and shoulders. I’m dead. I just gotta find a place to lie down. It’s all over.” He stood up and moved around, stretching and bending.

“He ran over a cop?” she asked, incredulous.

He told her what had happened, as best he could remember. Most of his effort was concentrated on bearing the pain.

He moved to the sink, ran some cold water, wet a dishtowel and laid it around his neck.

“What’s this?” Constanzia asked, pointing to the briefcase.

“Earl Lee left me downtown. I think he was shot.”

She tried to open the locks. The numbers on the three little wheels next to each hasp were all different.

“The number’s have been turned. Do you know the combination? She asked.

“No.”

“I’ll put it away. You want a bath?”

He looked at her. "A bath? A goddamned bath? I just told you that Earl Lee ran over a cop!" he shouted. "I was in the damned car! The cops saw me!"

She stepped back, looking at him like he was crazy. "I'll fill the tub for you."

He laid his head on his arms and puked in the sink.

* * *

Constanzia swished her hand in the bathwater, turned on the hot water tap, and added some bath oil.

Rick murmured and opened his eyes. She sat on the toilet next to the tub.

"Feeling better?" she asked.

"Some."

"Ramon called."

"And?"

"I told him you had the briefcase. He said you did good."

"What the hell did he mean by that?"

She shrugged and twisted on the seat. "I'm sorry about before. I didn't understand all that had happened."

He felt the tightness in his neck. "It's OK."

"Your pictures on TV. Earl Lee's, too."

"Huh?" He roused himself, trying to sit straighter in the tub and feeling a stab of pain in his neck.

"The TV. They said you're both wanted for murder. For killing a cop."

Rick sank back into the tub. He winced, and then groaned, feeling soreness all the way to

his feet. He hurt so much; he couldn't even try to figure out what he was going to do.

"How would they know you?" she asked.

"Morrow was in the garage. I wasn't completely sure till now. He saw me."

"Who's Morrow?"

He told her about Judge Sims, the grand jury, and Morrow.

She dried him off, then helped him to bed.

He lay back. "I've got to do something. Get out of this."

"Hector will help." She turned on the tap and felt the water.

He looked at her. "Hector's the one who got me into this!"

Constanzia patted him on the arm. "Hector will help." She dropped a

rock of cocaine into a pipe, put it in his mouth and held a match to the bowl.

He sucked and exhaled slowly. A warm wave lapped over him, easing the pain and soreness.

He'd rest, then think it all out. He'd find a way out of this mess. Maybe it'd be easier to die.

* * *

Rick's eyes opened. Ramon was looking into his face from six inches away. "You don't look so bad." Ramon stood.

Rick groaned as he struggled to sit.

Ramon dropped a briefcase on the bed and pried the hasps open with a knife he took from his pocket.

"Mr. A says you did OK," Ramon went on.

Rick rubbed his neck and flexed his shoulders. Ramon riffled through a packet of bills,

thumbed the band around where he could read it, and tossed it in Rick's lap.

"Five grand."

"I don't want it." Rick threw the packet of money to the end of the bed.

Ramon looked at him, "You don't have a choice. You earned it. Keep it."

Rick rubbed the back of his neck, "I don't want it," he mumbled as Ramon walked out. He slouched under the covers again, drifting back to sleep.

* * *

Constanzia rubbed oil on Hector's shoulders. The yacht rocked gently against the pier. Hector lay on the front deck on a white towel. His chin was propped on his arms, and his sunglasses were two dark orbs. He looked like a huge insect sunning itself.

He arched his back. "A little lower."

Constanzia squeezed the number six sunscreen into her palm.

"When do I get the money?" he asked.

"He hasn't mentioned it."

"You working him?"

She rubbed her hands together. "Si."

"I think he knows where it is already."

She started to spread the sunscreen. "He hasn't said anything, except he was real mad about Earl Lee and the garage deal."

Hector rolled over and sat up. He took his sunglasses off and patted the deck near him. "Sit here."

Constanzia moved closer.

"You must work harder, Cara. I need my money."

“I am.”

“Well, if he isn’t in love with you by now, he probably isn’t going to be. So he won’t tell you because of that.” He stood and walked to the railing of the boat, then turned toward her. “You tell him, I know he knows where it is. See what reaction you get. Tell him his ass is mine. He don’t deliver, I’ll make sure the cops get him. Tell him, jail is worse than death.”

“Si, I will.”

He gripped her face in his hand. “I want the money. I expect you to push him hard to get it. I’m losing my patience.”

“Si, si. I’ll find out,” she whispered, avoiding his stare.

* * *

Rivera motioned Morrow to the phone. Morrow put the receiver to his ear.

“Shut up and listen,” Rick Speed said. “I’m at a pay phone. It won’t do any good to trace it.”

“You’re going away this time, Speed.”

Rivera moved to a desk on the other side of the squad room and picked up the phone.

“Just listen, OK,” Rick went on. “I didn’t have anything to do with it. I didn’t know what was going down. I was set up. You meet with me, and I’ll lay it all out for you.”

“Sounds like de-JA-vu. Like the same bullshit excuse you had last time, only this time I know for a fact--I don’t just suspect.”

“You’ll believe. You gonna meet or not?”

“Sure. Sure, I’ll meet you.”

“No one else comes. Just you and me. Okay?”

“Sure. Where?”

After a minute, Morrow put the phone down.

Rivera looked at him.

“Speed says he was set up. Says he can give us everybody; close the case on my dead cop and Pace, too. Plus some gunrunners, drugs and something about invading Cuba. But we’ve got to work it his way.”

“Invading Cuba?” Rivera asked. “What’s he been smoking?”

“Let’s play it his way.” Morrow waved. “See what he’s up to. If it ain’t good, we’ll take him at the meeting.”

CHAPTER 21

“Why am I doing this?” Constanzia asked, etching carefully around Rick’s ears with the razor.

“You watch TV, don’t you?”

“It seems drastic.” She moved the razor and it made a scratching sound.

“It worked for Telly.”

She laid the razor on the sink and rubbed the last of the creme off his shaved head. He turned from side to side, seeing a stranger reflected in the bathroom mirror. Completely bald.

“With dark glasses . . . “ He rubbed his head.

Constanzia moved close to him and ran her hands over his scalp. “Umm. This might open new possibilities. I think it’s sexy.”

“You would.” He turned from side to side, inspecting his head.

“I went to Hector’s boat yesterday while you were asleep.”

Rick looked at her, waiting.

“He sent for me. I had to go,” she went on quickly.

“So?”

“I’m scared. He wants the money, bad. He kind of threatened me . . . and you too.” Her brow

furrowed.

“I’ve still got over a week left.”

“He might not wait.”

“I thought he kept his word.” Rick moved to the edge of the bed, flexing his shoulders and back.

“I think he will, but at the same time I’m afraid of what he might do.” She sat up and framed her face with her hands. “I’m afraid he’ll kill us both.”

Rick wrapped a towel around his middle and paced the room, flexing his arms and shoulders all the while, twisting his head, limbering up all the muscles.

“He says you got the money,” Constanzia went on, looking at him now. “Or at least you know where it is.”

He stopped and looked at her, “You believe that? You believe I already got the money?”

“I don’t know. I don’t think you want me to get hurt.” She looked away from him. “Probably not,” she conceded, letting out a sigh and slumping onto the bed.

He sat beside her, reached over, and moved her hair away from her eyes. “All right. No more games. I can get the money. I know where it is.”

She looked up, her face brightened. “Really?”

“Really.”

She started to move into his arms, but he got up and paced again, moving away from her, flexing again.

“So don’t be afraid anymore. I’ll get it. He can have it if I can find a way to get it to him without getting killed.”

She got up and reached for him. He felt her tears, warm on his bare shoulder. “Why are you crying?”

“I don’t know. I just feel sad.”

“Well, be glad. We’ll get out of this.”

“I hope so.”

* * *

Later the same afternoon, Rick got off the Metromover at Bayside. The shops lining the street were crowded. Tourists bustled against one another, streaming in and out of 401 Biscayne Boulevard, the curio shops and snack bars. The people buzzed around the kiosks with African, Brazilian, Indonesian and Native American handicrafts, buying things to carry home--things that would be forgotten or broken in a few months.

Street performers entertained, and a band played salsa. The natives shuffled their feet with a rasping, rhythmic sound; tourists moved with the music, mostly out of sync.

Rick planned on the crowd. He hoped he would be invisible, just another tourist in the mob. He worried that even with a baldhead he might be recognized by Morrow.

He took up an unobtrusive position near the head of the stairs in the fast-food section, standing against the wall and watching the entrance.

Morrow came through the door, paused, and looked around. He took the stairs two at a time. Rick watched him sit at a table in front of the McDonald’s concession.

Rick slipped into the tobacco shop at his back and stood behind a display, keeping a view of Morrow across the court.

He pulled the Oki cellular phone out of his pocket and dialed. This was only the second call on the new phone. The first one had been to Constanzia immediately after he bought it this morning.

He looked up from punching the numbers and saw Morrow still at the same table.

A pay phone on a wall ten feet from Morrow's table rang. It rang six more times before Morrow walked over and picked it up.

"Did you come alone?" Rick asked, watching Morrow around a display of cigars.

There was a short surprised silence. "Yeah." He stuffed one hand in his pocket and turned to look over the crowd.

Rick couldn't help smiling. "How come I don't believe you?"

"Who gives a shit? You either do like you said, or I'll get you. Sooner or later."

"I don't trust you, Morrow."

"Like I said. Who cares?"

Rick pressed the end button.

He watched Morrow as he kicked the wall and slammed the phone on its hook.

Morrow looked around. He took his jacket off and laid it on the chair at the table, then sat again.

Rick saw a Hispanic male, smoking a cigarette, wearing a tank top that had 'Shit Happens' stenciled on it. The Hispanic moved away from the Gardenia's window across the court and examined faces in the crowd. A white guy in a straw boater, worn low over his eyes, looked at Morrow from across the promenade and pretended to look through a magazine.

Rick dialed again.

Morrow caught it on the third ring.

This time Morrow spoke quickly. "I ain't playing games."

"Yes you are. I told you to come alone."

Morrow didn't say anything. He looked around again.

"Get rid of the backups."

Morrow's head snapped up as he searched faces frantically. Rick disconnected again.

Morrow stomped across to the man with the straw boater, talked, then signaled to the Hispanic in the tank top. They talked, looking around. Morrow was pissed; Rick could tell.

"Excuse me. Can I help you, sir?"

Rick whirled around. A young man wearing granny glasses was looking at him. Rick glanced back over his shoulder just in time to see the backups head toward the stairs.

"Thank you. I'll take these." Rick handed him a six-pack of El Rojos cigars.

After he paid, Rick left the cigar store and walked to a bench on the other side of the court. He dropped the sack of cigars in a trashcan, sat behind a large Eureka palm and zeroed in on Morrow through the foliage.

Morrow grabbed the phone before it stopped ringing the first time.

"Listen, don't interrupt." Rick didn't give Morrow a chance to say anything. "The Oceania Sud is a freighter docked in New Orleans. It was just purchased for the FCCL, a Cuba invasion group. The buy was made through a consortium--a dummy corporation and a limited partnership. The corporation is Esperanza, Inc. The partners believe they're in a bona fide venture. The ship is being loaded with rifles, rockets, grenades and other things to blow the shit out of Castro. The trade medium is cocaine."

"So what?" Morrow asked, scribbling furiously in a notebook.

"I told you not to interrupt! The guy who ran over the cop is a redneck named Earl Lee Cobb. He works for Ramon Galendez, who is Hector Affianta's right-hand man."

Rick watched as Morrow kept scribbling onto a small notebook, pausing enough to give him a chance to catch up.

Rick told Morrow the details about Billy Thompson's death and the missing three-quarters of a million dollars.

“I have the cash.” Rick said, letting it drop casually.

Morrow was silent.

“I’m being compromised,” Rick continued. “Put into a position so that my only way out is Hector. That’s what he wants. He’s keeping control of me so I can’t go anywhere but with him. I expect he’ll kill me when he gets the dough. I intend to get him the cash and stay alive.”

“You’re wanted for murder,” Morrow said.

“I wasn’t in on the deal. I was set up. I told you that before. Aren’t you listening?”

“OK, let’s say you were set up. What now?”

“I’m in a place most undercover cops would give their left nut to be. I’m inside.”

“I can’t make any deals.” Morrow’s voice didn’t sound too confident.

“Then I’ll disappear, and you pass up the bust of your career.”

Morrow paused. Rick watched him look at the wall for a second, then heard him say, “I have to clear it with the locals, DEA, Customs . . .”

Rick kept his voice stern. “You keep me confidential! Don’t mention my name to anyone!”

“How do I get hold of you?”

“Don’t bother. As they say, I’ll reach out and touch you.”

* * *

“Where’s this information coming from?” the Chief of Detectives asked after Morrow had laid out his conversation with Rick Speed.

“A source, sir.” Morrow moved from foot to foot.

“A confidential informant,” Rivera chimed in.

The Chief of Detectives squinted at Morrow. “You got a CI?” he asked, sounding surprised.

“Yes, sir!”

“He works rapido, Chief.” Rivera grinned.

“How long are you here for?”

“I got a chit until the end of the week.”

The Chief grabbed the phone. “Give me your boss’s number. I’m gonna borrow you for a while. Hell, with someone inside, we might be able to bust this thing wide open. Wrap up a whole lot of shit.”

* * *

Six miles away at a Miami Beach marina, Ramon strode across the parking lot, carrying a black briefcase in each hand. He opened the wooden gate and picked his way along the dock to the fifty-six-foot Bertram, then stepped around coiled ropes, water hoses and extension cords littering the boardwalk. A sentry opened the transom of the boat, and Ramon stepped aboard.

“He’s here,” the sentry said, indicating the main cabin.

Ramon stooped inside the door.

Hector sat at a table in the main salon.

Ramon placed the two briefcases on the table in front of him, flipped the lids open, and twisted them around. “We still have the snow, plus the buy money.”

“Mr. Earl Lee did well.”

“He took one in the arm, but he’s OK.”

Hector closed the lids. “Speed?”

“I gave him five thousand. He’s hooked.”

“You think so? I’m not so sure.”

“He’s hooked. They got a want on him. It’s on TV. Murder One. He has no place to go except with us.” Ramon lifted both briefcases and placed them in a cupboard against the wall of the salon.

“He can always count on me.” Hector chuckled.

“It’s the only way left.” Ramón’s lips twitched.

“Get Earl Lee and Speed to the island. I don’t want them around town. A little rest and recuperation will be good. Then we can move on Speed for the cash.”

“Done,” Ramon said.

* * *

Hector was sweating. The boat rocked gently, bumping against the dock. Constanzia cowered on the corner of the bed. She tasted the salty hint of blood on her lip and kept her eyes closed tightly. Someday she would kill this bastard.

Seconds later, he went into the bathroom. She could hear the shower running, then in five minutes he came back and went out the door. She sneaked into the bathroom.

The water was cool over her body and she leaned against the wall. Maybe she could talk Rick into killing him. She could then take the money and get the hell away. Rick wasn’t a bad guy. He’d do just as well as Luis or anyone else. She could always dump him when the opportunity presented itself.

She bumped her head against the wall gently and cried quietly, knowing that her weaknesses were Hector’s strengths. He had all the cocaine and money she could ever want. If anything happened to him, she’d have to find someone to take his place. She knew she couldn’t break away, no matter how much he humiliated or hurt her.

She took a deep breath and let the cool water pepper her face. After all, she rationalized; she

had it pretty good. He didn't abuse her often, and he never put any marks or bruises on her face. He just got his kicks from violent sex and a little slapping around didn't really hurt that bad.

Twenty minutes later she finished showering. The bedroom was empty when she came out and dressed. She retouched her makeup. Hector was on the phone in the main salon when she came out of the bedroom.

"Si, Carlos, si," he said.

He waved good-bye to her without smiling. She stopped at the refrigerator, stooped and pulled a Pepsi from inside the door.

"Three thousand more guns have been ordered. They'll be ready in two weeks, then they can be put aboard," Hector was saying.

She pressed the cold can to her forehead and then popped the top. She looked at Hector again. He waved good-bye again and pointed toward the dock.

Hector ignored her. "Another few months, Castro will be no more. You have my word. We will free our homeland. I guarantee it."

She eased the door closed, walked the length of the dock, and revved the engine of her white Honda convertible over and over again as she took a small vial from her purse, pinched a bead of white powder between her fingers and snuffed it into her nose. The squealing tires pierced the quiet of the marina and left two black strips on the asphalt. She drove furiously, angry with Hector, at herself, at her situation. She resolved again to find a way to be free of Hector.

She squealed around a corner and pressed the accelerator. The car leapt forward, fish tailing on the pavement. She'd have to figure a way to get Rick to do it for her. She'd have to figure a way to keep the money.

CHAPTER 22

Dick Benning slouched along the hall toward the assistant director's office. He'd rather have a root canal than be at C.I.A. headquarters. He always felt cornered when he came to Langley. In the field he was in control. Each time he came in, he got his ass in a sling. This was only the fourth time he'd been back in thirty years.

The goddamned AD probably wanted to put in his two cents' worth on Cuba Libre. Probably try to tell him how to run Hector and mas Palmas. Shit, probably tell him how to load the

goddamned ship. Next he'd be telling him where to get the rifles and the rest of the munitions and probably even laying out the initial landing. Benning would have to teach the shave tail about the Bay of Pigs and lessons on how not to do an invasion.

The brass plaque on the door was clear and shining, sparkling against the dark wood. He pushed the door open and walked into a large room with potted plants in corners and prints of English hunting scenes on the walls. The secretary looked up and smiled automatically.

Ass-kissing bitch. Probably flashes that silly grin at everybody walking in the door, just in case it's a GS-13.

The secretary asked him to have a seat. The smile had already faded upon her knowledge of his lack of importance.

Everybody treats field men like shit, he reminded himself. But without us, there wouldn't be a C.I.A. Just a bunch of bureaucrats sitting around offices in suits, telling each other how great they are and making up intelligence reports.

Just as he sat, she told him the Assistant Director would see him. He hadn't heard a buzzer. The AD probably used lights, or maybe a little ass shocker embedded in her chair to let her know when he was ready to see someone.

Benning went through the door and into an oversized office at least thirty feet square. A picture window took up one wall framing the forests and woods cloaking the Virginia countryside. The Assistant Director, his shock of brown hair sitting firmly in place, came around the corner of a desk large enough to be a bed. "Dick! Good to see you. How was the trip? Anything I can get you? Tea, mineral water. What?"

"Nothing, thank you, sir."

"Hey! We're alone." He grinned.

Benning ran his hand over his thinning hair. He remembered when he used to imitate

President Kennedy's hairstyle in the early sixties, when he first came to work for the Company. But his hair was gone now, and so was Camelot.

The A.D. motioned him to a chair in front of an informal arrangement of couch and coffee table. God, he dreaded these meetings. Coming here to face whatever was coming, while not knowing it might be. At least they could have told him why he had to come.

After they had gone over the family--Benning told him he'd gotten divorced since he saw him last--then switching to the latest exodus from Cuba and comparing it to the 1980 Mariel boatlift.

The Director chortling about how stupid Jimmy Carter had been. Finally, picking up a folder and laying it on the table.

"I guess I better get right to the point. The Budget Committee has red lined most of your request. There's not enough to go around."

"It figures," Benning said.

The Assistant Director cleared his throat. "I'm leaving you on your project though. You're free to run with it until you retire."

"How much do I have, sir?" Benning asked. Sir, hell! This kid was young enough to be his son.

"Fifty thousand. You've got to spread that over the next eleven months."

"Fifty Thousand!" Benning's mouth set in a firm line. He clenched his teeth and felt tears of frustration welling up. He was tired. He had fought for Cuba Libre most of his life and had been thwarted in every action he had taken. First the Bay of Pigs abandonment, then public apathy and political disfavor with the way the Company interfered in foreign governments, and now his funds were being cut off. He took out a handkerchief and blew his nose, commanding the tears of frustration to stay hidden.

The Assistant Director moved back to his desk, taking the red folder with him. He checked

his watch.

“Isn’t there anything else I can use?” Benning asked as he stood.

“’Afraid not.” The Assistant Director rustled through some papers.

Pissant. Too busy to listen. Hell, Dick Benning was slipping in and out of Cuba during the missile crisis while this kid was still in grade school. Benning clenched his fists and leaned on the desk. “I need at least two hundred thousand,” he insisted.

“Not here, Dick. Can’t help you. Sorry.”

Tat-tat-tat, like a machine gun. In other words, get out of here; it’s over.

“Listen! Castro is ripe to be taken out. We’re almost ready to move. One more allocation, and we can wrap this up. Think of it! A free Cuba! A ready-built market on our doorstep! The project’s too important to be torpedoed!”

Benning began quietly, but his voice was rising until he was nearly shouting.

The Assistant Director popped up. His face flushed and a vein stood out on his forehead. “Calm down, Benning. I told you, fifty thousand. That’s it. It’s out of my hands. This comes from the top. If it’s any consolation, I’m sorry.”

Benning straightened, stepped back, and blinked rapidly. Hot tears threatened to spurt out of his eyes if he lost control. His fists were clenched at his sides. “I’ve been working on this for thirty years.” His voice calm. “I can do it, if it’s funded. I promise.”

The Assistant Director came around the desk, grasping Benning’s shoulder. “You’ll work it out, Dick.” He guided him to the door. “You’re experienced. Raise it in the field, you know how. Hell, I remember hearing stories about you in the Academy. Dick Benning, the Ghost of Cuba, could do anything. Castro even had a million-dollars bounty on you, didn’t he?”

The A.D. slapped him on the shoulder and Benning winced. He kept enough control to stop his fist as it started to rise; on it’s way to smashing the young prick in the face.

Benning dabbed his eyes.

“I can’t give you anybody,” the Assistant Director went on. “You’ll work it out, though. Call in some favors. You know how it works.”

Benning put his handkerchief in his pocket. “I can’t do it alone.”

“Do as much as you can. If you have to drop it, there’s no problem.

Castro can’t live forever.” The Assistant Director looked him in the eyes. “I have great respect for you, Dick. You were in the hottest part of the Cold War, we all know that. It’s just that times change. There’re other projects that have more promise than Cuba. Its not personal.” He opened the door and nudged Benning out.

Benning got through the reception room and into the hallway quickly. Everyone in Langley must be laughing at him. Well, they could kiss his ass, because he wasn’t going to quit. He’d make the next eleven months count. He had a few options that smart-ass kid didn’t know about. He’d call in some favors.

* * *

Morrow and Rivera were munching on sandwiches from the deli across the street. The smoke had almost cleared from the squad room without Pace there to keep it stoked up.

For the last hour they had been talking about Pace. Morrow took the blame saying that he should have emptied his gun into the car, then maybe Pace would still be alive.

“Hey, bro. You can’t blame yourself for something some scuzzbag criminals did.”

“But--“ Morrow insisted.

“But hell, bro. Speed might not be involved. He might be set up. If you’d have emptied your gun into the car, you might have killed everyone. Don’t lay it on yourself. I worked with Pace for six

years. He knew the score. He lived for the thrill of the kill, and he knew how dangerous it was. It ain't your fault."

"I appreciate the support, but I still wish I had emptied my fucking gun into them."

"We got to concentrate on busting this case open and making those scumbags pay for Pace. We'll do it." Rivera punched Morrow on the shoulder.

"What's with this interagency stuff?" Morrow asked.

Rivera gulped the last of his sandwich. "We're in a sensitive international area. We got different rules than you have in Savannah. Everyone's got to be notified: DEA, Customs, everyone."

"Just so we can keep our confidential informant confidential."

"I'm zipped." Rivera whisked his hand across his mouth. He laid his hand on Morrow's shoulder, and his face became solemn. "I miss Henry a lot, but I just keep telling myself that it goes with the job. Anyone of us can cash in at anytime. I know he wouldn't have changed a thing."

"Thanks," Morrow said, but still felt just as guilty.

* * *

In a Washington, D.C., hotel, Benning snapped awake to the phone ringing. His bones ached from sleeping in a chair in front of the television. He mumbled into the phone as he rubbed his face, trying to wake up.

Cliff Sears clipped New York accent poured into his ear. "Do you remember the class?"

"Yes."

"Meet me there in thirty minutes."

"Thirty minutes," Benning replied. The line went dead. Cliff Sears and he had graduated Harvard together and joined the Company within months of each other. Cliff was now section chief

at the Nicaraguan desk and had agreed to help him out with Cuba Libre. Cliff has been smart enough to ask for a reassignment after the Bay of Pigs flopped.

Benning snapped the television off and stretched. He pulled clothes out of a suitcase on the bed, then took a shower and slipped into a pair of slacks and white shirt. He sifted through several documents in the suitcase, found the driver's license that had his picture and the name Peter Jensen. He rummaged again and found the Social Security card with the same name, along with a Visa card and an American Express. He held a ring up to the light, barely reading the dark letters circling it. "Harvard, 1960."

He stopped at the door and scanned the room for anything he might have forgotten.

Twenty minutes later, he was threading his way through stacked bales of cloth, past sewing machines being operated by black and hispanic women, and into a room with a long folding table and several metal folding chairs. The sweatshop was in a decrepit building in the slums outside Arlington, Virginia. It was a nondescript place to meet in private and almost no one spoke English.

Benning closed the door. Cliff stirred a cup of something and was seated at the end of the table. His gray, Savile Row suit complemented his hair, slightly graying at the temples. His immaculate white shirt provided a stark contrast to the drab surroundings. "Coffee?" he asked.

"Sure. No sugar, cream."

"I know, I know."

"It's good to see you. How long's it been?"

"Four years."

Benning sat on one of the chairs. Cliff moved away from a battered coffee urn and handed him a cup, steam rising from the liquid. "You're clean, right?"

"No one followed." Benning blew out a big breath. "I have to be careful. I'm not so popular anymore. Not like it was when Ole Jack stood beside me, you, and Dulles and had his picture

taken, right?”

“Things change,” Cliff said.

“Certainly not for the better, at least.”

“You weren’t completely cut out.”

Benning took a sip. “Might as well have been. I’m left with damn near no money and no field men.”

“There’s two or three of us who think you were treated badly.”

“I thank you and the others for that--“

“We’re going to give you two replacements. Use them for whatever you need, but keep them on the periphery. Need to know basis only. They’ve been told that they’re going to assist in an interagency operation. Don’t involve them directly.”

“I can use them,” Benning said.

Cliff lifted a briefcase onto the table, snapped the locks, lifted the lid, and turned it around to Benning.

“We’ve also made a donation. It’s only ninety thousand.”

Benning felt hot tears welling up in his eyes again. “Thanks. Thanks a lot.” He fought to keep control. Fought to keep from becoming emotional.

Benning reached into his pocket for his handkerchief. Cliff walked to the front of the room and leaned against the wall.

“We feel your work is important, Dick. We are a minority. The A.D. calls you his anchor. Says he can’t get a promotion until you retire. He can’t cut you off entirely though--you do have a friend or two--and we both know that the FCCL carries a lot of weight in South Florida.”

“You all are still taking a risk.”

“Not really. We’ve talked to the senator from Florida, and he gave us the green light. It’s

unofficial, of course, but if the shit comes down, he'll be there with a shovel. Personally, I don't care. I've done all I can do, and if I have to, I'll retire."

Benning sipped. "They're pressuring me to retire. Have been for a long time."

"Then make the next few months count. Get everything delivered. I'll supply you with anything I can."

Cliff moved back to the table and sat opposite Benning. "Your operation may have been compromised."

Benning wiped his eyes, and stuffed his handkerchief into his pocket. He snapped the lid of the briefcase shut. "What do you mean? Who?"

"I don't know. A clerk reviewing routine interagency communications came across a reference to the FCCL. Dade County requested an assist from DEA and Customs. The two guys we're giving you have connections with both agencies. Use them and find out what's going on."

Benning sipped from his cup, trying to make a connection with a face that could have been the source of the information, but finding no one suitable.

Cliff laid a manila envelope on the table. "There're three DEA and Customs badges in there. Use them, but you didn't get them from me."

"I understand." Benning stood and gathered the case and envelope. At the door, he turned.

The man folded his right hand into a fist and tapped the top of the table with his ring. Benning tapped his Harvard ring against the doorframe, then left.

Thirty minutes later, Dick Benning, traveling as Peter Jensen, left on a Delta flight to Miami, carrying a briefcase and an overnight bag that he refused to check.

* * *

Morrow set his coffee cup on the table at the Waffle House as the phone on the wall rang. He

reached it before the second ring ended.

“Your backups are getting harder to spot,” Rick Speed said.

“I don’t have any backups.”

“Sure. Anyway, the bad guys still have the snow your guys were going to buy. They got the buy money too. It’s all on a boat at the marina on Key Biscayne. It’s a fifty-six-foot Bertram, white with blue trim. The name is Copo De Nieve. Snowflake. It’s parked at berth twenty-two, Biscayne Marina.”

“He’s brave, ain’t he, advertising his business on his boat. When’s the best time to go by?”

“I don’t know. I don’t think there are any plans to go anywhere. The boat stays docked, mostly. There’s a smaller boat with it. We’ve used it for diving.”

Morrow cleared his throat. “We’ve contacted Customs and DEA about the ship. Their guys will be with us by tomorrow.”

“I’ll keep you posted.” After a slight pause, Rick asked, “By the way. Why didn’t you shoot?”

Morrow was silent on the other end. “I don’t know. I suppose it’s hard to shoot someone you know--someone who may not be a criminal.”

“Well, whatever your reason. Thanks.”

“You just come through for me.”

“We’re going to put them away Jim. That’s a fact.”

* * *

The guard on the Bertram watched the man wearing dark sunglasses follow the German Shepard along the dock, being led by the dog. The dog picked its way around the lines and hoses strewn along the boardwalk, the man following with a shuffling step. As they came even with the

boat, the dog stopped and started barking.

As the dog continued barking, the guard sauntered over to the rail and yelled at the blind man, telling him to get the dog the hell away from the boat.

Hector Affianta came onto the upper deck and watched. Ramon stood at his shoulder, his hand inside his jacket front.

The blind man pulled the dog's harness and said something. The dog stopped barking and paced past the boat, the blind man being led along. The guard watched the man until he saw a woman on a small sailboat down the dock yell at him. He and the dog boarded the woman's boat and disappeared below. The guard flicked his cigarette into the water and moved to the other side of the Bertram, adjusting his shoulder holster and the .357 Magnum inside.

"What's that all about?" Hector asked.

"Don't know," Ramon replied. "Just a blind guy."

Ramon shrugged in response to Hector's look, and then followed him into the salon.

* * *

The supposed blind man spoke into a cellular phone in the small sailboat. The woman handed him a Heineken, the bottle dripping moisture.

"It's a hit," Rivera said into the cellular phone. "Rambo alerted on the boat."

He listened a second or two. "One or two guards. We can take them." Rivera asked over his shoulder. "What's he doing now, Gloria?"

The woman looked through the Zeiss binoculars. "Nothing. He's on the other side of the boat."

"He ain't doing nothing," Rivera said into the phone. He listened again. "OK. I'll cover this

end.”

Rivera punched the end button and laid the phone down. “When it gets dark. We gotta stay here to cover this end.”

Gloria nodded and looked through the binoculars again.

Two hours later the cellular phone rang, and Rivera picked it up.

“The judge won’t issue a warrant,” Morrow said.

“Why the hell not?”

“Judge says we don’t have sufficient direct evidence that any drugs are on board.”

“Rambo alerted on the boat!”

“Judge says you’re not here to say that.”

“I can’t get off this boat. I walk out, they’ll get suspicious.”

“Have Gloria bring the boat around to the dock,” Morrow suggested.

Rivera asked Gloria if she could move the boat. She just laughed and said no way.

Rivera was quiet a second. “Ask the judge if he’ll let me call him.”

“Hold on.”

Rivera heard Morrow lay the phone down, a door open, and then in about two minutes Morrow was back. “He’s coming on the line.”

“Detective Rivera?”

“Yes, sir. I wanted to ask if you could listen to my statement over the phone, Your Honor.”

“Go ahead, detective.”

“Yes, sir. A couple of hours ago, I took our drug detection dog alongside the target vessel and he alerted. We think the cocaine involved in a sting operation is on board. A cop died in the sting yesterday, and we’re sure these are the guys. It’s been confirmed by our CI.”

“Search warrants are to be supported by affidavits, Detective. You know that,” Judge

Hernando said.

“Yes, sir. You can swear me over the phone, and I’ll give you my supporting statement under oath, and it can be transcribed by your secretary. Then I’ll sign it after we make the bust.”

“I don’t know. It seems irregular.”

“But not illegal, sir.”

“Well, I think you’re on shaky ground, but I’ll accept your sworn statement over the phone and your reducing it to writing later.”

Rivera thanked the judge, then hung on for his secretary to come on the phone and take the statement.

After he hung up, Gloria told him there was no movement on the boat. He looked at his watch. It was four-thirty. Evening rush hour traffic was just beginning, everybody getting off work and heading home. Maybe the heat would let up in a few minutes.

* * *

Rivera checked the dock. The lights hadn’t come on, as it got dark. He had shut automatic sensor off. Ten minutes later, the sun was gone and long gray shadows stretched between the docked cruisers. The water was calm and made lapping sounds against the pilings and boats, in unison with the clicking sounds of the barnacles.

A black Chevrolet van pulled into the parking lot at the end of the dock. Six men in black jumpsuits, Kevlar vests and armed with M-16’s, suddenly jumped out when the rear doors opened and slammed back against the metal sides. A boat in the channel with the red stripe of the Coast Guard on its bow trained a spotlight on the Bertram. The men thundered over the dock. Rivera climbed out of the sailboat and ran toward them, snapping his vest into place.

A voice bellowed from the Coast Guard cutter, amplified by a bullhorn. "You are under arrest! Put your hands over your head! Do not move! We are coming aboard!"

The six men clambered over the side of the Bertram and quickly fanned out. Two ran to the bow, two ran into the main salon and two took up positions near the fantail. The guard slowly raised his hands.

Rivera, Sanders, Morrow, and the Chief of Detectives followed the two members of the SWAT team into the main salon.

Hector Affianta was standing in the middle of the room, wrapped in a terrycloth robe. His face was stern but not scared. He raised a glass to his lips and took a sip, the other hand in the pocket of his robe. The two team members stood on each side of the salon, their M-16s trained on Hector and Ramon. Ramon was seated, his hands resting on his knees.

"What the hell's going on?" Hector shouted.

Morrow and Rivera pushed past. Morrow pulled a paper from his jacket and handed it to Hector. "We have a search warrant. Why don't you just sit down and keep quiet?"

Hector took the warrant, looked it over, then sat on the couch.

The handler brought Rambo into the salon. The dog paced around the room, sniffing and searching, sticking his nose under the cushions on the furniture, then moving to another area.

"Come on, Rambo. Come on, boy. Find it for us," his handler coaxed.

As the dog went past a cupboard on the lee wall, he barked, looked at his handler, then barked again.

Morrow opened the cupboard and pulled out two briefcases. He set both of them on the coffee table directly in front of Hector, smiling at him. "I think we found what we want."

Hector didn't say anything, but stared straight ahead.

Morrow looked at the numbers on the wheels. "Give me the numbers."

“What numbers?” Ramon asked. “I never saw those before in my life.”

Rivera walked over to the sink, opened a drawer, and handed Morrow a large knife.

Morrow pried the hasps open on both cases. He opened the lids and sat back. “I’ll give you ten to one that’s cocaine and I’ll give you twenty to one that money has our mark on it.”

Hector looked into the briefcases. “Where did that come from?”

“You got problems, señor,” Rivera said.

Hector settled on the couch once again. “I would like to speak to my lawyer.”

“After we book you,” Morrow said.

“For murder one,” Sanders said.

“Fuck you,” Ramon said.

“Try it,” the chief said.

Hector crossed his legs. “I would like to call my lawyer.”

“Later,” Morrow said. “You’ll have plenty of time later.”

* * *

Morrow finished the fingerprint card on Hector and threw it onto the desk. He guided Hector to a chair and snapped the handcuffs back in place on his wrists. The phone on the desk rang.

“Jim,” Rivera said, holding the phone out to him.

Morrow picked up the phone and turned his back toward Hector and Ramon seated across the room. “Hello.”

“You got it?”

“Yep.”

“Am I still clean?”

“Nothing was said. At all,” Morrow assured Rick Speed.

“Good, I’ll be in touch. I’ll let you know what happens when they make bail.”

Morrow dropped the phone into the cradle.

* * *

Around ten o’clock the next morning, Rivera bit the last of his sandwich and washed it down with a Coke in a McDonald’s cup. He stepped across the hall of the Dade County Courthouse and threw the empty cup and napkin into the trash container. Morrow walked up in a clean, pressed suit, white shirt, and tie. His hair still wet from the shower.

“You look good after only four hour’s sleep,” Rivera said.

“Hey, I wouldn’t miss the prelim for anything.”

Rivera looked at his watch. “Let’s go.”

They filed into the courtroom and sat in the jury box. Everyone stood as the judge came in and took his seat behind the bench. The judge announced that preliminary hearings would be the business of the day, and then indicated that the clerk could start.

The clerk stood. “The State versus Hector Affianta and Ramon Galendez.” Her announcement rang through the courtroom.

Rivera and Morrow were called in turn and told of their participation in the search. Yes, the cash was marked and was used in the aborted drug buy when Detective Henry Pace was killed. No, neither of these suspects were occupants of the car.

The judge looked over the bench, “You’ve got a weak case for murder one,” he told the prosecutor.

“It was the same money that was used in the drug buy, Your Honor,” the prosecutor insisted.

“You know you have a problem with equal access. Sounds like there were a lot of people on that boat before the arrest.”

“Primary control, Your Honor. Mr. Affianta is the owner of the boat and was in primary control at all times before the arrest.”

“Weak. Very weak.” Judge Gaines looked over papers in front of him. “What’s your position on bond?”

“We’d like no bond, Your Honor. We believe these two gentlemen are a threat to the community or would flee if released.”

Hector’s Miami attorney jumped up. “Your Honor. Mr. Affianta is a respected citizen of this community. He has no criminal record. He is a businessman, a respected member of several charitable and political organizations in the community. He owns property and has strong ties to the community. He’s not going anywhere, and the DA knows it. Besides, as you stated, there were several other people on and off that boat. Anyone could have put those cases in the cupboard without Mr. Affianta’s knowledge or permission. As you said, the DA has a problem with equal access and primary control isn’t going to fly. We ask that he be released on his own recognizance, Your Honor.”

“Well, Mr. Perez, good to hear from you. What about Mr. Galendez?”

“He is an employee of Mr. Affianta’s. He was on the boat in the performance of his employment. He was merely a guest, and the DA can’t hope to argue primary control in his case. We ask that he be ROR also, your honor.”

The prosecutor started to say something, but the judge waved his hand. “I’m not going to grant ROR, but I do think you’ve got a weak case. I’m going to order a hundred thousand cash bond or two hundred thousand property bond on both defendants.” He banged his gavel and asked for the next case.

Rivera and Morrow moved out the door and along the hall.

“We’ve got to have your CI testify, bro,” Rivera said. “He can put those drugs and the money into their hands.”

“Right. I just have to convince him to come in.”

“He ain’t gonna wanna do that, facing a murder rap.”

“Maybe we can do something about that.”

As they walked down the steps of the courthouse, two men stepped in front of them. Both were dressed casually, in floral print shirts and jeans. Both of them were wearing Nike’s.

“You Morrow?” the tallest one asked.

Morrow looked him over. Had to be a Fed. “Yeah. What can I do for you?”

The man flashed his identification. “DEA. I’m Willie McDonald, like in the hamburger joint. This is Tim Robbin,” he said, pointing to his companion. “You asked for an assist on some kind of drug deal.”

“We’ve got something going. We need some help,” Morrow said.

“Good. We’re here to help. Can we go someplace and get a cup of coffee?” McDonald asked.

CHAPTER 23

The clock in the rental car showed two thirty A.M. when Rick and Constanzia coasted down the I-16 ramp onto Montgomery Street in Savannah. Rain on the pavement reflected sparkles from the streetlights. Two cars passed, one coming, one going. Rick eased to a stop at the Oglethorpe Street intersection, squirmed and stretched his stiff back. Driving twelve hours, stopping only for gas and potty breaks, was a marathon. Rick adjusted his rearview mirror. A white Savannah police car with blue lettering pulled behind them.

Rick flipped the right turn signal and cleared left traffic. He turned right and glanced in the rearview mirror again. The cop, illuminated by the lights of the Civic Center, was talking on his mike.

“Damn!”

“What?” Constanzia asked.

“He’s running a tag check.”

Rick looked again. The cop’s mouth moved in pantomime. He’d find the rental car out of

Miami was in Constanzia's name. The cop might stop them on that alone and he might have the want for murder on his lookout sheet. Rick drove carefully and watched the cop in the mirror. If they were stopped, they were sunk. He'd heard enough cops say that you might outrun the car, but you can't outrun the radio.

One block on Oglethorpe past Montgomery, and Rick flipped the left turn signal, swinging onto Jefferson. The cop went straight. All for nothing. The adrenaline was pumping, though.

Two minutes later Rick parked the car in the lot behind his office building, and they slipped through the front door at 109 Jefferson Street. Rick held Constanzia's hand and led her through the darkness, not wanting to turn on any lights that could be seen from the street. He opened the door into his windowless office at the rear of the building, and as the door clicked shut, he flicked the light switch. The fluorescent lights hummed, then flickered on, bathing the room in bleached white.

Rick sat behind his desk, and Constanzia sat in a chair across from him. The desk was still cluttered with files and papers, stacked and tottering, threatening to fall at any time. He pulled a wad of money out of his pocket and counted out two thousand dollars in hundreds and put them in the center desk drawer. Then he leafed through the phone book on his desk, dialed Marie's number, then lied and told her he was still in Miami.

"Have you been to the office?" he asked.

"No. But I called the clerks and told them that you were away for a while. I had no idea you'd be gone so long."

"It wasn't planned. Some things came up."

"Judge Clemmons is really mad. You know he doesn't like to continue cases. It builds up his docket."

"He'll get over it."

“He said he was going to hold you in contempt.”

“Thanks for the info. Listen, Jesse Kinser is going to take over my cases for a while. Meet him in the office and give him a key. Forward my calls to his office, OK?”

“Sure.”

“Thanks. Is there anything else?” Rick asked.

“Not that I know of.”

“Jesse will pay you.”

“There is something else. Did you hear about Mr. Thompson?”

“No, what?”

“He was smothered in the hospital. He didn’t die from the fall.”

The blonde going into Billy’s room flashed in his mind. It had to be her, Rick thought, whoever she was. Or maybe it was a he dressed up like a she. “Do they have any idea who did it?”

“There hasn’t been anything in the papers, if they do.”

He looked at Constanzia. She sat in a chair, legs curled beneath her, inspecting strands of her hair.

He said good-bye and put the phone back.

“Billy was asphyxiated.” He watched her face for a reaction.

She looked up, shaking her hair back in place. “Your friend? What do you mean?”

“Stupid question.” Anger vibrated in his voice.

She blushed. “What does that word mean, aphyxi . . . ?”

“He didn’t die from the fall. He was smothered to death.”

She looked at her hands and remained silent.

“He was smothered . . . or strangled. In the hospital. When I was there with Morrow, I saw someone go into his room. I didn’t think anything about it, just thought it was Betty Sims. Course,

it could have been someone wearing a wig, couldn't it?"

"Who?"

"You tell me." He inspected her face, watching for any glimmer of a response, trying to find a clue to what she was thinking.

She fidgeted in her chair and smoothed her jeans. "Are we ready to go yet? I'm tired and I need a shower."

Rick bolted from his chair and rushed around the desk. He grabbed her shoulders and shook her, his face inches from hers. "Don't you give a shit?" he shouted. "Did you smother Billy? Were you wearing a wig?" He shook her with each question.

She grabbed for his hands, and he shook harder, shouting questions at her. She pushed his hands from her shoulders and twisted in the chair, trying to escape.

"Stop! You're hurting me! I didn't do anything!" she cried.

He released her and stood up, his anger spent. He leaned on the corner of the desk, steadying himself.

She rubbed her shoulders. Her eyes were closed and tears slid from under her eyelashes. Rick could see everything about her vividly, as if he were looking at her features through a magnifying glass. He felt stupid, regretting his outburst. She wasn't cold enough to kill someone.

She held herself and rocked slowly, then wiped her eyes and looked up at him. "You're just like Hector. You treat me nice while you're screwing me, then I'm nothing to you. Nada! A whore! I always find all the wrong men!"

He reached out. She recoiled, drawing away from him and pressing against the back of the chair.

"I'm sorry," he said.

"Don't touch me!" she shouted.

He knelt in front of her and took her hands gently into his. She resisted for a second. "I'm sorry. This thing is making me paranoid."

She sobbed and buried her face on his shoulder, collapsing onto him.

A feeling swept over him. He knew he didn't love her, as in everlasting, non-dying love. But he felt a strong concern for her. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have thought it. I won't hurt you again."

"Promise?"

"I promise." And he meant it. She was like a small child, easily hurt, although unintentionally.

He held her, smoothing her hair, kissing her on the cheek and tasting the salty tears. "Let's get a room and some sleep."

Someone had murdered Billy. The fall hadn't done him in and someone was afraid he'd regain consciousness. Ramon and Earl Lee sprang into his mind. One of those sons-a-bitches probably put on a wig and smothered him. He wanted to believe her when she said she hadn't done it, so he did.

* * *

Constanzia checked them into the Holiday Inn at the foot of the old Talmadge Bridge, getting an outside room, bottom floor. Rick stayed in the car until she opened the room, then carried the bags in. She didn't say anything to him. She opened her suitcase, took out some underwear, then shut herself in the bathroom. Rick placed a call after he heard the shower come on.

Jesse Kinser's sleepy voice answered. Rick apologized, then asked him to meet Marie at the office at nine that morning. Could he cover for him for a few days? There were only five criminal clients, one divorce and a red-car, blue-car. The red-car, blue-car could wait. Nothing needed to be

done on the divorce, the time had not run out yet on the discovery. The criminal clients needed to be seen, and there were probably some arraignments. Drop by the jail and see Luis Ortenzia. Rick explained that the bond had been set, but Luis wouldn't be able to post bail.

Take the two thousand dollars in the middle desk drawer, pay Marie seven hundred and keep the rest for helping out. Call Judge Clemmons and smooth things over.

"What do I tell him?" Jesse asked.

"I don't care. Hell, tell him I had to go to Miami on a federal case."

Kinser winced, then resigned himself. "I'll take care of it."

"How come you're not in the South Pacific?" Rick asked.

"I'm going, really. Just a few more things to get done, then I'm outta here."

"You always say that. Hell, you been saying that for years," Rick said, amused.

"I mean it. I'm going. You gonna come along and be my caretaker?"

They had both talked long hours about getting out of the law profession and escaping to some island paradise. Jesse had shipped containers from the states full of two by fours and plywood for over four years. Then, when he could get the time, he leave for a month and work on the house. Jesse was always telling him they could make a living in the islands as dive guides. They'd be able to live in peace, without clients to bother them. They'd stay out of touch with most of the world. Jesse had the house and he always offered Rick the yardman's job. Maybe someday he'd take it.

"You could fly your Ultralight, lie in the sun and fish," Jesse coaxed.

"Yeah, I know. Eat coconuts and Spam and dally with all the island maidens."

"Maybe someday, buddy. Hey, you need anything else, call me."

Rick hung up, smiling, feeling better, as he always did after talking to Jesse.

The shower was still on and Constanzia probably wasn't coming out for a while. He wrote a

note for her and put it on the pillow, then slipped out the door.

* * *

The rental car was parked in the shadows, and he watched the Ultralight hanger for over an hour before moving. Finally, sure nobody was around, he let himself in and got the gym bag full of money.

Fifteen minutes later he was on his way downtown, keeping within the speed limit and driving carefully.

He stopped at a Seven-Eleven and bought a package of AA batteries and a Pepsi with ice. He put the batteries in his pocket with the miniature Akai tape recorder, four blank mini tapes and a package of yellow Post-Its. All of it about the size of a cigarette pack.

He was counting on Chief Deputy Wright not to be overly inquisitive and to put a lot of faith in their friendship.

CHAPTER 24

For the tenth time, Carlos mas Palmas checked the security cameras trained around his compound in South Miami. He had alerted his security staff that dissidents would probably cause trouble. Hector Affianta's picture was spread across the Miami Herald. Bad news for the organization.

Dissidents had been causing trouble as far back as 1963, when he organized the Free Cuba of Castro League. They were either misled or totally ignorant. After the Bay of Pigs escapade, they had become especially strident in their attacks.

Carlos had been proud to be a freedom fighter, but freedom fighters were ridiculed, not admired. It was something you either got used to or you let the dream die. He would never let the dream of a free Cuba die--not as long as he breathed.

He had recruited Hector. Hector happily paid the director's membership fee of ten thousand per year and had the right connections to get guns and ammunition for the cause. The members weren't interested in how Hector got what was needed; they were just happy he got it.

Carlos adjusted the focus on one of the security monitors. Hector was a businessman, having started with nothing and made his fortune selling used cars, then getting the Mercedes

dealership. Carlos ignored the rumors about Hector and his so-called drug organization, not really caring if they were true or not. Hector's services were valuable. The organization had to have him.

He sat in a chair next to the double French doors overlooking the acre and a half of his backyard and dialed Hector's private number.

"Pronto," Hector answered.

"Hector, mi amigo."

"Hermano mia, essa." Hector replied.

"The directors and trustees are killing me with this arrest thing, plastered all over the papers."

"Si, es muy malo."

"What are you going to do?"

"I am innocent, compadre. I know nothing about the drugs or money. Our enemies planted those things on my boat. They try to make me worthless to the organization, ruin the progress we've made, now that we are so close to regaining our homeland."

"Si, es possible."

"Mi presidente, I would do nothing to hurt our work," Hector said.

"Tch, tch. I'm not El Presidente, yet," Carlos said in good humor.

"Lo siento. It's just that we are so close. Our enemies will do anything to stop us."

"Si, lo obvio. I will take care of the directors and trustees."

"Gracias, Hermano."

"You will take care of the problemo, pronto. Si?" Carlos asked.

"Si, si. I will handle it."

Carlos hung up sat back in the chair. He wished he had thought of the simple explanation Hector had given. It was obvious; the pro-Castroites would do anything to destroy their efforts. The

Oceania Sud would be ready to sail in three months, loaded with enough munitions and arms to outfit a small army. He was ready to smuggle the contraband into the Sierra Madre--the same launch pad Castro had used--to his freedom fighters. He smiled at the poetic justice of it.

The phone buzzed, jarring him from his reverie.

Carlos heard Peter Jensen telling him--without introduction--that from what was in the newspaper, their cause had apparently suffered a setback.

“Non importante. It is the work of our enemies,” Carlos replied.

“Still, it’s not good publicity.”

“I agree, but it won’t harm our efforts. Hector is only a director because he pays his annual fee. He is not on the Executive Committee or the Board of Trustees. We can minimize his involvement, if necessary.”

“I’ll touch base with Hector. Tell him it’s important to keep a low profile,” Jensen said.

“Bueno.”

“Your friends in Washington are pleased. They have extended the project again. The change in administration is the best thing that could have happened. They’ll be spreading the money around like icing on a cake.”

“Muy bueno. I am glad to hear that. We are close.”

Carlos laid the phone in its cradle. His substantial financial contributions were paying their way. In another year, he would be President of a Free Cuba. Presidente mas Palmas! It had a nice ring to it. Of course he would have to suspend elections once he was in office; to give the country time to stabilize its new democracy.

* * *

Morrow, Rivera and Sanders were grouped around the table with Willie McDonald and Tim Robbin. The pictures were spread out.

“Two down, two to go,” Rivera said.

“Two to go?” Robbin asked.

“Rick Speed and Earl Lee are probably in the area, just lying low,” Morrow replied.

“You got a tip about the contraband on the boat, right?” McDonald confirmed.

“Jim’s CI tipped us,” Sanders said.

McDonald and Robbin looked at Morrow. “Who’s the CI?” Robbin asked.

Morrow looked at them. “If I told you, he wouldn’t be confidential anymore, would he?”

“Hey, man. We’re all together, you know, interagency cooperation and all. No need to get bent,” McDonald said.

“I’m not,” Morrow replied. “I’m just not going to flip my CI.”

“No problem,” Robbin said. “It’s not necessary. Now tell us about this ship.”

“It’s docked.” Rivera said. “Under Angolan registry. We’re keeping our eyes open. Anything happens, we’re ready.”

Morrow continued, “There hasn’t been any activity for a couple of weeks. It’s like they’re waiting on something.”

“Another shipment?” McDonald asked.

“Probably. When it happens, we’ll know,” Morrow said.

“We’re going to have to bring in Customs,” Robbin said, glancing at McDonald. McDonald agreed.

“Interagency stuff and all that,” Morrow said.

Robbin said, “We got good contacts, and good contacts always help.”

* * *

Hector came out of the bedroom, tying his robe around him. He flicked on the light in the study and nearly jumped out of his skin. “Santa Maria! You scared me to death!” Peter Jensen sat in an overstuffed chair. “How did you get in, anyway?”

Jensen stubbed out his cigarette. “Trade secret. We need to talk.”

Hector moved to the bar on the other side of the room. “You want a drink?”

“Sure. A Bacardi and Coke.”

“Cuba Libre.” Hector brayed. “That must have been a good joke, naming your favorite project after your favorite drink.”

“It was Dulles’s idea. He figured he could remember who got the assignment.”

Hector handed him the drink and sat opposite. “So, compadre, suceso?”

“The only thing happening is you’re getting too much publicity. How would the cops have known to bust you?”

Hector shrugged his shoulders as he downed a slug from his glass.

“I don’t know. Surveillance, maybe?” Hector asked.

“I don’t know. We have two boys on the inside, now. They’ll find out. In the meantime, you keep low.”

“I’m going to the Cay. I’ll set up the next shipment from there.”

“Stay long distance. Don’t get around the product,” Jensen said.

“From a professional.” Hector smirked. “By the way, I have a small problemo, you may be able to help.”

“What?”

“I have an employee in jail in Savannah, Georgia. His bond is two hundred thousand.”

“Go on.”

“Maybe you could get him here without the bond,” Hector continued. “He’s important.”

“Why?”

“He’s the key to a lot of money.”

“How much?”

“Three quarters of a mill.”

Benning sipped his drink, but didn’t say anything.

“The money could go for the cause. I know your boys are going to support us, but every little bit helps,” Hector said, coaxing him along.

“Who and where?” Jensen asked.

“Luis Ortenzia. Chatham County Jail, Savannah, Georgia.”

“I’ll see what I can do.” Jensen finished his drink and moving to the doorway leading to the patio.

“About the newspaper thing.” Jensen turned to go, then stopped. “Keep a hand on your boys. I don’t want any more arrests. And I’ll try to find out how the cops got wind of your boat.”

“I want to know as soon as you find out,” Hector said.

“Sure. You got any enemies want to see you go down?”

“Plenty.”

“What about that new lawyer?”

Hector paused and fitted a cigarette into his ivory holder. “Maybe. I thought I had him under control, but maybe not.”

“I checked him out. He’s clear. I doubt he’s the one. Anyone else close enough to know what goes on?”

Hector lighted his cigarette. “About a dozen.”

“Maybe I’d better have another talk with Speed,” Jensen said.

“Maybe. You might have missed something.”

Jensen looked at him, frowning. “I didn’t miss anything. But I’ll have a talk with him again anyway.”

Hector moved toward the door. “When do we get the next shipment?”

“I’ll let you know when. Le-Roy’s having some shopping problems right now. But it won’t be long.”

“Gracias,” Hector said.

“De Nada,” Jensen replied, as the door closed behind him.

Hector stared at the door, thinking that Jensen was a damned has-been, big time CIA shit, couldn’t do anything right. As soon as he got the guns, he’d get rid of him. Carlos would be the next President of Cuba and Hector would have a market monopoly. An entire country and he would be the Snowman. He’d run the police and Ramon would be Director of Customs. It was going to work. He’d make it work.

It could be Speed wasn’t as scared and under control as he pretended. Maybe he did have guts enough to snitch. He’d have to make sure as soon as they got to the island.

CHAPTER 25

“Norman Wright,” Rick spoke into the phone. He waited until Norman answered.

“Chief. Don’t say anything. This is Rick.”

A long silence. Rick could almost feel the apprehension coming across the line.

“OK,” Chief Wright finally said.

“Good. Anybody close enough to hear you?”

“Sure.”

“I’ll try to be circumspect. Don’t mention my name.”

“What’s up?” Chief Wright asked, starting to sound like he was very uncomfortable.

“Have you been looking for me?”

“A want is on the line for you.”

“I know. They got a warrant out on me for Murder One.”

More silence. Rick couldn't fathom what Norman Wright was thinking. They were more than casual friends, flying Ultralight's together on weekends and eating at each other's homes occasionally. Wright's wife and kids liked Rick and Rick thought that Norman liked him a lot also. At least, he was counting on his belief in that relationship now.

“Where are you?” Norman asked.

Rick laughed. “You're not that good a friend.”

“Is it true?”

“Of course not. I was framed.”

“That's what they all say.”

Rick heard a rumor of a chuckle in how he said it. He felt a flooding sense of relief, confident now that Norman believed him, that he could count on him. “Let me bring you up-to-date.”

Rick told Norman the facts and laid out his plans for the next few weeks. With his help, he could put some bad people away for a long time, Rick assured him. Billy Thompson's murderer was most likely in the group Rick was going to trap. But trapping animals was dangerous, especially when Rick himself and the money were the bait. He impressed the importance of Norman's assistance as much as possible, without sounding desperate.

“You think it'll work?” Rick asked.

“Sounds like you're juggling a lot of balls, but it's worth a shot.” A beat of silence passed.

Finally Norman said, “You can count on me.”

Rick let his breath out slowly. “Thanks, Norman.”

“I haven't spoken to you.”

“Right. I understand. I’ll be in touch.”

Rick quietly replaced the phone. He looked around River Street, walked to the parking lot across the street from Shucker’s Oyster Bar, and got into his car. He sat surveying a few early tourists going in and out of the shops and kept watching to see if anyone was acting peculiar. Maybe he would see someone quickly raise a newspaper in front of their face, or turn around in midstride. If he did, he would know he was being followed.

The multistoried buildings were Antebellum warehouses and their basements, where cotton used to be stored, had been converted into shops. All of them had engraved wooden signs painted in blue, pink, tan and black. There were specialty outlets selling rare tobaccos, gift shops and restaurants. Most of them sold junk made in foreign countries like thousands of other stores in as many other locations. River Street used to be a decrepit dirt road with a railroad track in its middle until the historical renovation fever hit town. Although it was an improvement over how it used to be, it rivaled every other tourist trap in every other city around the country. The only charm remaining were the parts of the street still paved with ship’s ballast stones.

No one noticed him as far as he could tell. No one appeared suspiciously interested in him. He started the car and drove away.

* * *

Rick dropped Polaroid pictures on the bed in front of Constanzia. She looked at the five pictures showing the gym bag with the money spread around it, shot from different angles.

“That’s why you were gone all night, huh? Where is it?”

“Safe.” He stripped off his shirt.

She picked up a photograph. “That’s the gym bag.”

“Yep.”

“How did you get it? You’ve had it all along, haven’t you?”

“It’s not important.”

She threw the pictures onto the bed. “My ass is on the line, you know. What if something happens to you? If I can’t deliver, I’m dead.”

“Good point.” He bent and pulled his shoes off.

“Oh, so I’m supposed to make sure nothing happens to you, is that it?”

“That would help.”

She fluffed the pillows and slouched under the covers, pouting.

He moved over, sat next to her, and explained, “We’ll take these pictures to Hector. I’m going to work a deal. He’s got to let us go. If he does, he gets the money, and we’re outta here. He’s greedy. He’s not going to blow three-quarters of a mill on something as stupid as revenge, or anything else. Not when he can have the money so easily.”

“What happens after we give him the money?”

“What do you want to happen?”

She twisted a corner of the pillow. “I don’t know.”

“You want to get away from Hector?”

“Of course, but I don’t know if I can.”

“Maybe I can work it out for you.”

“How?”

“Trust me,” he said.

“Just don’t keep me in the dark.”

He was in control once more. He had allowed events to control him too often in the past few days, now he would orchestrate events to control other people and obtain his goals. He was going

to put Hector away. He was going to make sure Ramon and Earl Lee paid for killing Billy. He was going to stay alive.

He felt sure Constanzia would cooperate. He doubted what he felt for her was anything like love, but a natural concern for her had arisen. He didn't want her to be hurt, but he didn't fully trust her, either. Prolonged sexual contact has a way of making one overlook important matters.

His first positive step was to quit snorting cocaine. It had been a new experience, not completely unpleasant, and he had been ready for anything new after the events of the past year--seeing his career crumble and his dreams die--but he didn't want to rely on it. It had numbed his mind and robbed him of his common sense; all the while impressing upon him that everything was in good shape.

He hadn't realized how far he had gone over the edge until Earl Lee killed the cop. After that day, he knew he had to gain control and finish this affair. He had a long way to go to get out of the snow zone--as Earl Lee called it--but today was the beginning of that journey. He was going to do it.

* * *

Meanwhile, on a small island in the Bahama chain, a helicopter landed in front of a large A-frame house. Hector Affianta jumped out and walked quickly away from the rotors down wash, shielding his eyes from the miniature dust storm. A man in a white jacket and black pants ran to the helicopter, unloaded three suitcases, then followed Hector into the house.

A woman, maybe in her early fifties, wearing a black dress with white lace at the neck and wrists, greeted him as he walked through the veranda doors.

Another man in a dark suit came into the room.

"Is Ramon here yet?" Hector asked.

“No, sir, he’ll be in this evening.”

“Any calls?”

“One from Miss Constanzia. She said the bank’s open. They’re on their way here.”

Hector then knew that Speed had the money all along. He couldn’t have gotten it as quickly any other way. Señor Speed was going to attend a special school. Hector doubted that he would graduate successfully.

The helicopter’s roaring engine intruded on his thoughts as it lifted off and tilted toward the ocean. Hector watched it picking up speed, flattening the sea oats, following a path that meandered through the oats and dunes, squiggling to the strip of white sand beach. It buzzed low over the whitecaps and azure of the ocean toward Miami.

A boat puttered by two hundred yards off the beach. Hector picked up a pair of binoculars near the door and focused. Two black men in light tan uniforms occupied the boat, one driving and one looking toward the house with binoculars. The boat had the word police, blue-stenciled on the side. Hector waved. The man looking through the glasses waved back. The boat picked up speed and planed, leaving a wake of white froth behind.

He paid a million a year to maintain the island, and it was worth it. He had protection and solitude, all in a beautiful setting. Paradisio. His paradise. On this island, he was king.

He used the island as his headquarters; directing his shipments of cocaine from South America, across the Gulf of Mexico, through the Caribbean and into the U.S. He could entertain clients whenever he wanted, without fear of the police intruding. The heads of several Cartel families had come to finalize their distribution routes over the years, always with the guarantee of safe passage.

But it didn’t have the bustle and activity of Miami, so he had to leave every so often. Go back to the States. Back to the action. In the middle of things.

No matter how often he had to leave, he was always glad to get back. Back to his kingdom.

* * *

“Line one for you,” McDonald said.

Morrow looked up from the Miami Herald he had been reading and put the phone to his ear.

“James Morrow. What can I do for you?”

“I’m going to the Bahamas,” Rick said.

Morrow quickly looked at McDonald, making sure he had put the phone back on the receiver. McDonald had picked up the paper and was turning pages. Morrow turned his back to McDonald and spoke quietly. “Where are you?”

“In town, but not for long. I’m leaving today.”

“I don’t like it. You get out of town, I can’t cover you,” Morrow said.

“You’re not covering me anyway. Don’t worry, I’ll come back.”

“If you don’t get killed. Not that I’m worried so much about you, but it’d sure fuck up my case. You know, the one’s that going to make my career.”

“Yeah, thanks. When I get where I’m going, I’ll be in touch,” Rick said.

Morrow thought his voice sounded tight, tense, like he was under pressure. “What’s up?” he asked. “Why are you leaving?”

“I’m being taken to an island in the Bahamas. I suppose it’s getting close to a showdown. It’s not my choice. In fact, I don’t have a choice.”

“I was just reading the paper. Mr. mas Palmas of the FCCL is throwing a big fund-raiser next week,” Morrow said.

“Oh.”

“Do you think you’ll be invited?”

"I doubt it. Why?"

"We could get you out if you want. Hector wouldn't try anything in front of so many people."

"That'd flush our case and I'd be strung out to dry on the murder charge."

"I suppose so . . . Forget it." Morrow straightened the phone cord. "How long will you be gone?"

"I hope not long. But If I'm not back in a week, send the Marines."

"Let me know something as soon as you light. And don't even try to run out on this. I'd never give up until I got you," Morrow said to the dial tone.

* * *

Dick Benning sat across the desk from the law clerk of the senior judge in the Southern District Federal Court. With abundance of white teeth and blonde hair--she looked more like a centerfold--than a law clerk. The granny glasses perched on the end of her nose were a good reality check. He had landed at the Savannah Airport an hour before and caught a cab to the federal courthouse one block north of Broughten Street.

"When will Judge Roosevelt sign the order?" he asked the centerfold.

"He's in Atlanta. But I expect him back day after tomorrow."

"What about the magistrate?"

"Afraid not. He's at Fort Stewart today, hearing misdemeanors. He doesn't have the authority, anyway. Judge Roosevelt allows him to hear only misdemeanor cases and probable cause hearings." She shrugged her shoulders at him.

"How about Judge Dowling in Augusta?"

"I could call him if you want."

“See if I can drive it up to him today.” Benning made a note on a business card. “If you could, please.” He remembered that he needed this woman’s help.

She reacted favorably at the please and punched in the number from memory.

“Art? Sandy Holloman. How are you?”

She listened.

“Great. Listen, There’s a gentleman here, needs an order signed. There’s a Luis Ortenzia in the county jail that he’s going to put into protective custody. He’s going to testify in a trial in Miami, and then he goes into witness protection. The locals have got some trafficking charges on him. Judge Roosevelt’s in Atlanta for the short list interviews for the Appeals seat. Do you think your judge would sign it?”

She listened again.

“Fine.” She leaned toward Benning and whispered. “He’s checking.”

He lighted a cigarette and after careful scrutiny, found the beginnings of tiny crow’s-feet near her eyes.

She frowned at him and pointed to the No Smoking sign. He stubbed the cigarette out on the bottom of his shoe and pocketed the butt.

“Yes . . . fine, thanks. I’ll send him on up.”

She put her hand over the phone, “He wants to know when you can be there.”

Benning looked at his watch. It’s ninety miles to Augusta, he thought, give myself two hours. “One o’clock.” Knowing that he’d be able to get back to Savannah today.

She told Art he would be there right after lunch. She put the phone down.

“You’ll need to file the petition. Take a certified copy and the order with you. Dowling will sign it.” Then she blessed him with another smile.

CHAPTER 26

Rick picked his way around the clutter on the dock, guiding Constanzia with his hand on her arm. They walked past the Bertram with red Police Property stickers plastered on the windows and on ropes across the entryway. A twenty-eight foot Cigarette speedboat, the engine idling and Ramon at the wheel, was parked in front of the Bertram. Earl Lee sat on the transom, one arm in a sling. Ramon had made the run to the Bahamas several times using the boat. Most of the time carrying a load. The load this time, would be human.

Rick helped Constanzia onto the boat, and Ramon immediately dropped the line and backed into the channel. They cruised at idle through the marina and into Biscayne Bay, the outgoing tide carrying them seaward.

Ramon eased the throttle forward. The boat leaped from the water and planed immediately. It skimmed under the Rickenbacker Causeway, around the tip of Key Biscayne, and into the Atlantic Ocean. Rick and Constanzia went below, set up the table and laid out ham and cheese sandwiches and celery sticks.

Earl Lee looked in. Rick held up a sandwich. Earl Lee shook his head, then disappeared. Rick ate the sandwich, drank a Premium Cristal beer imported from Peru, then lay back, kicked off his shoes, and fluffed up a pillow that had a musty smell. In five minutes he was asleep.

* * *

Constanzia came through the hatchway and sat near the transom. Ramon motioned. She moved closer to him.

“Donde?” Ramon asked.

“Que?”

“Speed.”

She shrugged. “Dormido.”

“Did he get the money?” he continued, speaking in Spanish.

“He says he knows where it is.”

“Not good enough. Why didn’t you get it?”

“He’s paranoid. He’d never give it to me. He’s scared and doesn’t trust anyone, not even me,” she said.

“Scared of what?” Ramon asked.

“Of being dead.”

“He should be. El Jefe is not going to be a happy man. He wants the money.”

“He has pictures,” she went on.

“Pictures? What kind?”

“Of the money.”

“Pictures aren’t gonna be good enough.”

“He says if he brought the money, he’s dead. He’s got a plan to get the money to Hector. I don’t know what the plan is. He wouldn’t tell me.”

“You’re not doing such a great job.”

“I got him here, didn’t I?” She stepped closer to him and touched his bare shoulder.

“Ramon,” she started.

He looked at her, his eyes narrowed. “You touch me again, I’ll break your fingers, Puta.”

She snapped her hand away. “I’m sorry.”

Ramon was silent for a while longer, keeping his eyes on the waves in front of the boat.

Finally, he looked at her. “If you don’t get the money from Speed, I’m probably going to be the one who has to kill you. You understand?”

A fearful shadow crossed her face.

“It’s nothing personal. I don’t particularly dislike you; it’s just my job. But I have no interest in you or what you can offer. So long as you understand that, we’ll get along . . . until it’s time for you to die.” He slowly turned to look full into her face. His lips twitched into a sardonic smile.

* * *

Once ashore on the island, Rick dropped his clothes bag on the bed and pulled back the curtains covering the picture window. The bungalow was on a small promontory overlooking a sandy beach, with a view of the dock where the Cigarette was tied. Rick could swear the bungalow was moving, just like the boat had for the last four hours.

The white beach circled around a cove and was backed by a ridge covered with palm trees and green undergrowth. Another bungalow was two hundred yards along the beach, where Rick saw Ramon and Earl Lee opening the door. “Where are we?”

“Oyster Cay. In the Bahamas.” Constanzia spoke over her shoulder. She was shaking out her clothes and hanging them in a small closet. “Hector’s paradisio.” She laughed harshly.

“How big is it?”

“One or two miles long, less wide. I don’t know exactly, but you can walk around it in a couple of hours. You can’t get lost.”

“Or get away,” Rick said.

He plopped on the bed and put his hands behind his head. Constanzia was bending over the dresser, snorting two lines. She motioned toward him, offering him a hit. He shook his head no. She finished, rubbed the last bit onto her gums, and crawled onto the bed, next to him.

“Don’t you like it anymore?” she asked.

“Yeah. But it’s too regular. Bad habit.”

“What about me? Don’t you like me anymore?”

“Sure, I like you,” he said.

“But you don’t trust me.”

He was silent, looking out the window at the blue sky and white mounds of clouds framed like a picture. He didn’t want to reply to that question.

“I just want to get out of this mess,” she said into his shoulder. “How can we get the money to Hector?”

“I’m working on it. It’s got to be from a distance. In case he decides we’re a liability after he gets it. There’s got to be an escape hatch.”

She burrowed closer to him.

“Maybe we could mail it to him.”

“I doubt it.”

She smoothed the hairs on his chest. “I wish we could figure a way to keep it. That would be nice.” She looked up into his face.

“No way. Hector would never allow it.”

“Some of it, then.”

“You figure it out, let me know.”

“If Hector were dead, we could keep it.”

He was shocked speechless for a minute, then he recovered. “And who would kill him?”

“We could. You could figure out a way.” She snuggled closer to him.

“I’ve never killed anyone. If I do something like that, I’m no better than Hector. Besides, the money isn’t important enough to kill anybody over.”

“What would you do if it came down to either you or Hector? Would you kill him then?” she

asked.

He thought about it, but he didn't know the answer.

She snuggled closer, and in a few minutes she was snoring lightly.

Rick carefully unwound himself from her arms and legs and slipped out the door. He headed for the low rise at the end of the beach. He supposed killing Hector was an alternative. But then what? Turn the money over to the cops? Keep it? He could sure as hell use it, and besides, what had Billy said? Stealing from crooks isn't really stealing, or something like that. What about Ramon and Earl Lee? Would he have to kill them, too? Better yet, why not just make sure all of them were arrested for Billy's murder and then keep the money? Constanzia would be free, too.

He didn't really believe that he was capable of killing anybody. Maybe in self-defense, but certainly not for money. Of course, he might not have a choice.

He broke into a slow lope along the beach.

* * *

Ten minutes later, Rick wiped sweat off his face with his wadded shirt. He crested the hill and could see across the island. He saw a house, an A-frame, that fronted on the ocean a half mile away.

To his right was a single asphalt strip and a large building at the far end. An airplane would approach and take off over water. The strip stopped at a drop-off, overlooking the surf.

A one-winged airplane sat near the end of the strip, farthest from the cliff, shaded by palm trees. A sand-and-shell road paralleled the runway, twenty feet off the asphalt.

Fifty feet from the building was a smaller house, with a wraparound porch enclosed by screen. He shaded his eyes against the sun. The blue ocean, dotted with small whitecaps,

stretched to the horizon behind the house. Rick could barely see another island in the distant, blue-white haze.

An engine started in the distance. Rick squinted and watched a Jeep leave the A-frame and head in his direction. He started down the hill toward the bungalow, wondering if something important was about to happen. If they were coming for him, he sure couldn't get away. Might as well face them. Maybe he could back them down, or something.

Rick and the Jeep arrived at the same time. Constanzia, wearing white shorts and a halter-top, sat on a lounge chair. Ramon switched the engine off as Rick came to a stop, huffing and out of breath. He bent over and then sat on the low wall surrounding the patio, getting his breath back.

Ramon got out of the Jeep and walked up to Rick. "You might see things here. Mr. A expects you to keep it to yourself."

Constanzia stretched in the chair and slipped sunglasses on.

Rick didn't feel it was necessary to say anything, so he didn't.

Ramon looked around and sat on the low concrete wall, ten feet away from Rick. Then he continued, "There'll be other guests. They'll want privacy. Not a lot of dumb-ass questions."

"I never ask dumb-ass questions," Rick said, having recovered enough air to talk.

Ramon squinted at Rick. "I understand you have some pictures. Mr. A would like to see them."

Rick looked at Constanzia. She didn't move. He went into the cottage and got the Polaroid's from his bag, then returned and handed them to Ramon.

Ramon briefly looked at them and stuffed them in his shirt pocket. "Where is it? The money, I mean."

Rick sat on the wall again. "Safe."

"Mr. A doesn't have a lot of patience, compadre."

Rick looked toward the Cigarette tied at the dock. "Are we gonna get any diving in?"

Ramon's eyes narrowed. "OK, what's your suggestion?"

"I don't know yet. See, Ramon, I know where the money is, and I can get it. But if I turn it over to y'all, I suddenly become expendable."

"Lo simpatico."

"Yeah, well, sympathy and a buck'll buy you a burrito."

Ramon's face clouded briefly. "We're in no hurry. We'll talk again. But it'd be better for you if you'd quit fucking around and give the man his money."

Rick watched Ramon's back with the sweat streak along the middle as he trudged to the Jeep and roared off, kicking up sand and bits of seashells.

Constanzia had not moved. He sat in a chair opposite her. He watched her face, wondering what was going on behind the dark sunglasses. Just when he thought he had her figured out, something changed, and he felt stupid.

"You tell them everything I say?" he asked, irritated.

She turned her head toward him. "Not everything." She said the words matter-of-factly.

"At least you admit it." He felt himself getting angry.

"Don't be childish, Rick." She looked over the tops of her sunglasses. "I have to keep them happy."

"I guess so." He forced himself to relax and concentrated on releasing the tension. "Everyone has to look out for numero uno. I just wonder, when it comes time to choose sides, where you gonna light?"

"On my side . . . and yours." She laid her head back.

Rick walked to the low wall and propped his foot on it. He could hear her sit up in the chair behind him and heard her say, "I've told you before. I'm scared of Hector. He uses everyone. No one

is important. So long as I'm useful to him, I'm safe."

He turned to face her. "Hectors not really stupid enough to think that you're going to take me to bed a few times, give me some free dope, then I'll play true confessions. He can't possibly believe that you have any control over me. He can't be that dumb."

"He's Latino. He respects few men and no women. He controls everyone around him, and if he can't control them, they're expendable."

"Unless they have something he wants." Rick looked back at the ocean. "I wonder who's expendable as far as you're concerned. Do I get flushed if you're threatened?"

She got up and moved close to him, putting her arms around his neck and looking up at his face. "You don't get flushed." She nuzzled his lips. "It would help, though, if you could find a way to keep a few hundred thousand and get rid of Hector for me."

"Why didn't you just keep it when you had it?"

She thought about it for a few seconds. "No guts, I guess."

Just then a twin-engined plane buzzed overhead. They watched as it arced over the cove and set up for a straight in landing on the strip. The plane disappeared below the low hill as the engine throttled back. They heard the tires squawk as they connected with the asphalt. Probably the unknown guests arriving, Rick thought. He was curious who they might be.

CHAPTER 27

The vaulted living room of Hectors house was windowed from floor to ceiling and provided a breathtaking view of the ocean. Plump, comfortable chairs and couches formed a semicircle in front of the window. The floor was hardwood, waxed and polished so that the furniture was reflected as an upside-down picture. Rick looked back at himself in a shimmering image. Several rugs with floral patterns lay scattered about, giving the room a casual appearance and adding splashes of pastels in contrast with the dark floor.

Hector sat looking out the window. Peter Jensen, the man who rode the Lear Jet to Louisiana with Rick, sat across from him. Hector turned as Rick stopped by the couch. "Would you like a drink, Señor Speed?"

"Sure. Amaretto si Saronno, on the rocks," Rick replied.

A black-jacketed man went to the bar on the far side of the room, then said, "We don't have Amaretto, sir."

Rick shrugged. "Whatever, then."

"Fix him a Rum and Coke, Henri. Cuba Libre." Hector laughed loudly. Jensen grimaced, glanced at Rick, then took a drink from the glass in front of him.

“How do you like my paradisio, Señor Speed?”

“Great. Quiet. Beautiful.”

“You remember Peter Jensen?” Hector motioned.

“The consultant,” Rick stretched out his hand.

Jensen leaned forward and gave a limp shake.

“I liked your pictures,” Hector said.

“I didn’t like yours. You know, the ones Ramon gave me. But what the hell, I figured if you could play that game, so could I.”

“Oh, yes, the warehouse. I had almost forgotten.” Hector continued, “We need to resolve our problemo.”

Rick shifted in the chair, then looked at Jensen. He was staring out the window, apparently not interested in the conversation. “Maybe Mr. Jensen can help,” Rick half smiled.

Hector looked at him and then at Jensen. “Acaso. E posible.”

Jensen came out of his reverie. “Glad to help.” He looked back and forth at Rick, then Hector.

“Señor Speed is a lawyer. He represented Luis when he was arrested in Savannah. He’s helping me recover some property,” Hector told Jensen.

“Property?” Jensen cocked his head.

“Si, important property, the property we talked about. But Señor Speed doesn’t trust me. He’s afraid if he gets my property back, I won’t be grateful.”

Jensen thought a second. “Doesn’t sound like much of a problem. Be grateful. Problem solved.”

“Ah . . .” Hector held up a finger, “If it were that easy. You could help, Señor Jensen. Señor Speed could give you the property, and you could give it to me. You see, he doesn’t trust me to be grateful. He might trust you, though. How about that?”

“Why should I trust the consultant?” Rick asked.

“Why shouldn’t you trust Mr. Jensen?” Hector fixed a perplexed look on his face.

“I don’t know Mr. Jensen,” Rick explained. “If I don’t know him, how do I know if I can trust him?”

Hector stood up, and the smile washed off his face. He moved a step toward Rick and pointed his finger at Rick’s chest. “You have only four days left, Señor Speed, then your time is up. You’d better figure out something, rapido, or . . .” He closed one eye, sighted along his finger and snapped his thumb forward. “Pow!”

Hector then moved past Rick, going toward the back of the house. “We’ll talk later.”

After he was gone, Jensen looked at Rick. “Sounds serious.”

“Deadly serious.”

He looked at the magnificent view of ocean, beach and clouds and sipped his drink. He wasn’t interested in discussing the problem with Jensen. He didn’t know how involved Jensen was; he did know that he would trust him about as far as he could spit.

“Hector is having some problems,” Jensen said. “I understand he was arrested. The police found some planted drugs on his boat.”

“Planted drugs?” It flashed through Rick’s mind that Hector and Ramon might stay out of jail. Some sharp lawyer would get them off. Especially if they could make that defense work.

Jensen interrupted. “He’s claiming that the pro-Castroites set him up, want to discredit him with the politicians, cast a bad light on the FCCL.”

Rick looked solemnly at Jensen. He wondered where this guy was coming from. He couldn’t believe that Jensen was taken in by Hector; there must be something else there. Maybe Hector was using Jensen to get the money out of Rick under his own terms. Sort of short-circuit the negotiation process. Jensen just didn’t seem to fit, sort of odd-guy-out.

“The offer still stands. If I can help . . .”

“Maybe. I’ll let you know.” Rick stood up.

“Yeah. Let me know.” Jensen watched him.

Rick emptied his glass and left by the front door. He walked the shell-and-sand road to the airstrip. A white and gold twin-engine Beach Baron was parked near the end. Rick nosed around the plane, looked inside, found the flight log and riffled through it. No entry for the incoming flight. One entry from Miami to Tallahassee and return to Miami. One for Miami-Key West-Miami a week before. Maybe the pilot was a courier, delivering drugs, leaving off entries he didn’t want anyone to know about.

The key was in the ignition. The needles of the fuel gauges pegged full when he switched it on. All ready to go. Maybe he could fly out of this mess. He’d never flown a twin-engine before, but if he operated the throttles together, the engines would become one. Couldn’t be that hard.

He jumped from the wing and turned around just as the Jeep with Ramon and Earl Lee slid to a stop five feet from him, engulfing him in a cloud of dust. Earl Lee was flexing his right arm, leaving the white sling around his neck empty. His left hand cradled a dark and dangerous Mac-10 automatic pistol, clip in place.

Rick walked to the Jeep as Ramon switched it off. He leaned against the fender and squinted down the runway.

“What’cha doing?” Earl Lee asked.

“Nothing.”

“Don’t be messing around the airplane.” Ramon laid a black Mac-10 on his knee for Rick to see.

Rick looked down at the Mac-10. “Right.” Rick shoved away from the Jeep and started across

the tarmac toward the shade of the palm trees. After a minute, he looked over his shoulder.

Ramon walked around the plane, his hands on his hips, watching him.

Rick broke into a trot, ducked under the palm fronds and into the cool darkness of the shade.

* * *

When they returned to the dock at eleven-thirty the next morning, Constanzia and Rick jumped out of the Cigarette and onto the pier with a grouper and three lobsters. Jensen was sitting on an upturned box in the shade near the fish-cleaning sink. Ramon tied the boat and walked along the pier toward the beach.

“Nice catch,” Jensen said.

Rick threw the grouper on the cleaning table.

“I’m going to take a shower.” Constanzia tossed three lobsters in the sink. Rick waved her on.

Rick slipped the thin point of the knife into the skin at the base of the dorsal fin and felt for the bone running the length of the fish.

“Odd as it may seem, I might need your help,” Jensen said.

Rick looked up.

“You don’t seem to be a part of this.” Jensen waved his hand toward the island.

Rick grunted and peeled back the slab of flesh he had opened up along the upper fin, scraping the rib cage and following the widening gap with the knifepoint. He glanced at Jensen.

“You don’t, either.”

“Let’s say that I’m more of an observer than anything.”

“Voluntarily?” Rick asked.

“Yep.”

“What kind of help might you need?” Rick asked.

“I don’t know yet.” Jensen lighted a cigarette and blew out a lungful of smoke.

“How do you know I can help you?”

“I think you can, if you want, or would.”

Rick went back to cleaning the fish. “Let me know.” He cut the conversation off. He’d wait on their next move.

“I will.” Jensen stubbed out the cigarette and lighted another. “Mind telling me your plans for Hector’s property?”

Rick was silent, head down, concentrating on filleting the fish.

Jensen went on. “I’m in a ticklish spot here. I’m just a consultant. I don’t want to get into anything I shouldn’t. But I have an interest in that property also. It’s going to go for a good cause.”

Rick washed the scales and blood off the fillets, slipped the knife between the pink meat and the skin and sawed the length of the fish, removing the remaining skin and scales. He threw the two fish parts into the sink and looked at Jensen. “I did a favor for a friend and got in trouble. Now I’m trying to get out of it.”

“What kind of trouble?”

“Well, for one, Miami PD has a murder warrant out on me.”

“That’s trouble.”

“Yeah. Now I’ve got four days to get Hectors property back to him.”

“Is that a problem?”

“The problem isn’t in getting it back to him. The problem is staying alive once I do.”

“Come on, you’re not serious,” Jensen said.

Rick looked at him, then stuffed the two halves of the fish in a plastic food bag and sealed it. "All I want to do is get out of this. I don't want anything else; I don't care about anything else. Hector and his friends can do what they want, when they want and with whoever. I just want out alive."

"Hectors a reasonable person, I'm sure--"

"Yeah," Rick interrupted. "So everyone says. But I can't rely on that. I need more."

"Hector will keep his word."

Rick thought Jensen sounded sincere, but maybe he was putting on a great act.

Jenson went on. "I mean it. I've known him for a long time and while I don't particularly like him, he's pretty good at doing what he says he will." Jensen watched Ricks face.

"I know too much. The only thing keeping me in this game is the property I've got. No one can get it but me. That makes me indispensable."

"So let's work out a way of getting it back while protecting you."

Rick looked at Jensen carefully, weighing just how far he could go and of what use this guy might be. "What's your real game?"

"You don't have a need to know." Jensen said it straight-faced, without humor.

"My father used to say that when he was in the army."

"What?"

"A need to know. He had a security clearance, did some flying for Air America during Vietnam. Flew missions for the CIA. He used that phrase when we asked him what he did over there. 'You don't have a need to know.' He said it wasn't enough having a top- secret clearance; you also had to have a need to know. Sort of catchy phrase, I always thought."

"A lot of good men flew for Air America. Did he make it back home?"

"He made it back. Were you in Vietnam?"

“No. I fought a war closer to home,” Jensen said.

“Are you in the military?”

“No.”

“Some government agency?”

“Forget that. Let’s get back to your problem.”

Rick shrugged. “I’ll work it out.”

Jensen looked toward the beach. “Let me know. I’m willing to help. I have influence with Hector. He’ll do what I say.”

Rick watched Jensen move along the pier toward the beach.

Constanzia shouted at him from the cabin, waving her arms over her head. As he walked up to her she told him they were going to a party.

“Where?” he asked.

“Hectors. Tonight. He has a surprise for us.”

CHAPTER 28

That evening Hector stood at the end of a long table on one side of the room. A full moon was hanging over the ocean, framed in the middle of the glass wall. Its light coated the breakers with white phosphorescence.

Jensen tilted a bottle of Zinfandel, gently pouring four glasses, one after the other. Hector waved Rick and Constanzia forward as they entered the room and motioned them to their chairs. Rick sat at Hectors left, and Constanzia sat next to Jensen across the table.

“Please, sit,” Hector said. “Mr. Jensen is doing the honors.”

Jensen handed each a glass. Rick sipped the wine.

“We will start with chilled shrimp,” Hector said, tinkling a bell next to his plate. “Then we’ll have Señor Speed’s grouper and lobster, sautéed in butter with pecans.” He kissed his two fingers and made a flourish.

Thirty minutes later, Rick could affirm that it was the best meal he had ever eaten. He just hoped it wasn’t his last. Rick finished his dessert in six bites, then folded his napkin and quietly burped around the mud pie resting in his stomach. Constanzia excused herself. Rick started to rise, but she motioned him to stay.

The table was cleared while Hector lighted a cigar. He rolled it between his fingers.

Rick knew that all this preparation was leading to something important, he just didn’t know what. Maybe Hector was ready to negotiate. Work something out that Rick could accept.

“Cuban,” Hector said, addressing the cigar. “Still the best in the world.”

“I thought they were illegal,” Rick said.

“Ah, yes. Señor Speed, the lawyer. Worried about legalities, si?”

Rick kept silent and took another drink from his wineglass. He wasn’t going to rise to the bait.

“Laws are for the masses, not for those of us who have destinies to fulfill,” Hector went on. “They are an inconvenience sometime; but I admit, they are necessary to maintain control. Necessary for others.”

“What do you say, Mr. Jensen?” Rick asked.

“I don’t comment on politics or semantics.”

“But you’re a consultant. Consultants are supposed to make comments,” Rick said.

“Only when they are paid.”

Hector chuckled. “Good point.”

Rick looked from one to the other. Jensen didn't smile, but he had a faintly amused look about him. Hector was smiling broadly, as if he and Jensen shared a secret. Constanzia returned, and they all moved to the circle of furniture with the view of the moon and the surf.

Hector motioned toward the door at the far end of the room. "We have a guest."

Rick looked in time to see Ramon leave, the door swinging behind him.

Hector puffed on his cigar. "I have invited him to have a drink with us."

Jensen stood up and set his wineglass on the table. "I'll be going to my cottage now."

"You're welcome to stay," Hector said.

"Thank you, but I have an early morning and a flight to Miami."

Hector shrugged. "I'll have someone drive you over."

Jenson stood. "Thanks. Mr. Speed. Señorita." He nodded to each.

Jensen walked through the same door Ramon had exited. Hector poured more wine for the three of them, and they waited.

The wall of glass behind Hector looked as if it were a painting: expanse of beach, large white moon, silent breakers in motion, peaceful, serene.

"Your time is nearly up, Señor Speed. What am I to do with you?" Hector asked, swirling the liquid in his glass, watching it.

Rick's stomach began to quiver. He took a breath to calm himself, then sipped his wine before answering. "It's simple. I deliver the money and you let me go."

"Deliver? How?" Hector asked.

"I haven't figured that out yet."

"It's easy. Give me the money, you walk." Hector spread his hands.

Rick looked at Constanzia. "She goes with me."

"What do you mean?" Hector asked, puzzled.

“She wants out. We’ve talked it over. She wants to go with me.”

Hector got up and moved behind Constanzia. He squeezed her shoulders. He took a package out of his pocket and handed it to her. She dumped the white powder onto the tabletop, chopped it, lined it, and snorted. She rubbed the back of her hand across her nose and mouth, leaned back on the overstuffed chair and closed her eyes. Her hand reached up to touch Hector’s as he squeezed her shoulder again. Hector leaned over, putting his mouth close to her ear.

“Is that true, Cara? Do you want to leave me? Go with Señor Ricky here?” He looked at Rick, smiling.

“No,” she whispered.

“She says no.” Hector raised his eyebrows in mock surprise.

Rick wasn’t totally surprised. He had known all along that the cocaine was important to her, although he didn’t completely understand why. Too bad she didn’t know what was good for her. But it wasn’t something he could be bothered with right now. “OK. Then she stays. Whatever she wants.”

Hector moved back to the chair across from Rick.

“Your plan? How are you going to deliver?” he asked.

“The money’s in Savannah. Anything happens---“

“Si, si, I know. Anything happens to you, it’s gone.” Hector interrupted. “Go on.”

“The trade has to take place somewhere near Savannah. On neutral ground. In the open.”

Hector crossed one leg over the other.

Rick went on. “We swap at night. Just you and me. No one else. No Ramon or Earl Lee.”

“I don’t know. How do I know I can trust you?” Hector asked. “Shouldn’t I be worried? Maybe you’ll double-cross me. Shoot me in the face or something?”

“The swap won’t require us to be within two hundred feet of each other,” Rick said. “And I’ve

never killed anyone in my life. I wouldn't know how."

Hector sat back. "Non es possible. I don't believe we can do it your way, Señor Speed."

Rick stared. The silence stretched to a minute. Hector hunched forward. Rick kept staring.

"If you can't get me the money, you're dead," Hector said, patiently. He hitched forward in his chair and went on. "Without the swap, I don't need you. The money's gone anyway. If you can't deliver, I may as well write it off, get rid of you and go on."

Hector shrugged, got up and walked to a sideboard beside the dining table. He opened a drawer and lifted a blue cloth with something in it. He moved back and sat across from Rick again, just the low coffee table between them. As he peeled back the edge of the blue cloth, Rick saw a dull glint reflected from a stainless steel, nine-millimeter semiautomatic pistol with a fifteen-round clip beside it. Hector looked at Rick, his eyes hooded and menacing. "Do you get my point?"

"I get your point. But we can work something out. I don't want to die, and there's no use losing three-quarters of a million dollars." Rick enunciated the million, trying to bring some perspective back into the conversation and revive the awareness of the money in Hector's mind. Surely that much money was important to him. Rick couldn't believe otherwise.

"I'm willing to listen for a while longer. Go on," Hector said.

"Next plan. I'll deliver the package to you in the parking lot of the Savannah Mall on Abercorn. I'll go back to Savannah tomorrow. I'll deliver Friday."

"That's not a plan I would approve."

"It's the best I can come up with." Rick heard his exasperation ringing in his ears. He winced. He knew he sounded as if he were defeated.

Hector filled a snifter from a bottle of Chivas Regal on the coffee table. He dropped in two ice cubes from an ice bucket. "I think Ramon and Earl Lee will have to go with you."

"Then we don't have a deal." Rick fought to keep his voice from catching.

Hector looked at the pistol, then back at Rick.

“You can’t afford to lose that kind of money. What about your mission? How many rifles will that buy?” Rick asked.

Hector sipped his drink. “You have a point,” he conceded. “This is the way we’ll work it. Ramon and Earl Lee goes with you. You’ll give Ramon the money and walk away. You have my word.”

“Shit.” Rick turned his head, sounding disgusted now.

Hectors voice was low and cold. “You don’t know me, Señor Speed, so don’t underestimate me. If I give my word, I mean it. Just because you don’t approve of my activities doesn’t mean that I have no honor. I take your distrust as an insult. I do not tolerate insults.”

He picked up the pistol and rammed the clip into the butt. The slide clacked as loud as a thunderclap.

“Check,” Rick said, nervously.

“What?”

“Check. You have me in check. Like in chess. It’s my move, and if I don’t make the right one, I’m done.”

“I like that. Like chess.”

“OK. Ramon goes with me,” Rick said.

“Good. You’ll leave tomorrow.”

Rick looked at Constanzia.

Hector followed his eyes. “Forget her. She can never love a man. She loves the snow. Look at her, in her lover’s arms. She’s oblivious to us. Too bad, but she’s not worth it. If she were buying, she’d need six hundred dollars a day for the snow.”

Constanzia was leaning back, eyes closed, softly humming to herself, twisting a strand of her

hair.

The door at the end of the room banged open. Ramon and Earl Lee pushed through and dragged Luis Ortenzia between them.

Rick started. A thought zipped through his brain, wondering how in the hell Hector had gotten him out of jail. Why he was even here? What did Luis have to do with returning the money?

Hector motioned with the barrel of the pistol for Rick to remain seated. "Bring Luis a chair, please."

Ramon placed a chair at the end of the coffee table between Rick and Hector and pushed Luis into it. Luis hunched forward, his hands tied behind his back. Duct tape covered his mouth; his eyes were large and wet, the pupils distended to the size of quarters.

"Untie his hands," Hector motioned.

Earl Lee cut the cord. Luis rubbed his wrists. Ramon jerked the tape off his mouth. He winced but didn't cry out. His eyes were glistening in the reflected light of the room. He wet his lips with his tongue and looked at Hector expectantly.

"You know Luis." Hector spoke to Rick. "Luis used to be a good and trusted employee, but he abandoned his loyalty. In the name of love, of course. He also thought Constanzia would go with him. Poor Luis." He sighed, then spoke across Luis, as if he wasn't there. "He also lost his honor. Without his honor a man is nothing. Nothing!"

Luis licked his lips. "Padrone . . ."

"Silencio!" Hector screamed, his face flushed, eyes hard, the artery in his neck bulging.

Luis flinched and shut his mouth. He put his palms on his knees and sat up straighter.

"You will only speak when I tell you," Hector said more calmly.

Hector walked to Constanzia. She opened her eyes and looked at him.

Hector continued talking over his shoulder to Rick. "I don't know if Constanzia lost her honor

or not, although for a woman it is less important.” He smoothed his hand over her hair. “She was probably tempted by Luis, but she did try to get the money back to me. Probably frightened more than loyal though.”

He sighed, took her hands and gently pulled her to her feet. “What do they say in your profession, Señor Speed? Guilty beyond a reasonable doubt. I guess there’s reasonable doubt in Constanzia’s case. I can’t find her guilty of something she did not intend, can I?”

He continued, “But I’m not entirely convinced that I can trust her, although she may not be guilty. She must reaffirm her loyalty to me. Show me that I can once again trust her.”

He looked at Constanzia. “Comprende?”

She looked at him. He handed her the stainless steel pistol, the hammer cocked. She took it. He leaned over and whispered to her.

Constanzia stood, arms at her sides, the brushed steel pistol too big for her hand. Her hand moved slowly, raising the pistol in front of her face. Rick watched her with a hypnotized fascination. She brought the gun to her lips.

CHAPTER 29

Rick stood up suddenly. "No!" he shouted.

Earl Lee slapped him on the shoulder and shoved him back onto the couch. "Don't move again," he snarled.

Constanzia brushed the gun across her lips and held it against her cheek.

Luis fell out of the chair and to his knees. "Por favore, Padrone," he pleaded to Hector. "Don't make her kill herself. It was all my fault. I made her go with me."

"I can do nothing," Hector said. "She must affirm her loyalty."

Luis inched forward with his hands clasped in front of him. "Por favore . . . I will do anything! I love her."

"Kiss Constanzia for me then," Hector said.

Constanzia stood next to Luis. She leaned over and kissed him on the mouth, her eyes open, but glazed. Luis put his arms around her, starting to return the kiss, tears streaming down his cheeks, still on his knees. She lazily pressed the pistol under his left arm and pulled the trigger. The blast knocked Luis onto the end of the couch. He looked up at her incredulously, blood starting to bubble from his nostrils and lips. He grunted and his head fell to the side. A terrible, pervasive smell filled the room as his bowels emptied.

Constanzia handed the pistol to Hector and sat again. She tilted her head back against the chair, closed her eyes and began humming quietly again, twisting her hair.

The back of Rick's shirt was soaked. He wiped his hands on the couch. A blue haze hung around them. The smell of burnt gunpowder filled the air, encroaching on the smell of Luis's feces. His ears rang, and the smell caused his gorge to rise. He swallowed repeatedly, trying to keep dinner down.

"Punto!" Hector said expansively, smiling broadly, standing in front of the crumpled body, a cigar in one hand, the pistol in the other, his arms apart, as if he had just made a point in the

conversation. "She is reinstated to my good graces. She has proven her loyalty. The traitor is dead."

Luis's body lay half on the couch next to Rick and half on the floor. Rick saw the left side of Luis's shirt covered with blood. His eyes were half closed. Blood streaked from his mouth and nose, painting broad strokes down his face and neck. His right leg jerked spasmodically, as if hearing an internal beat.

Blood pooled around his body, spreading across the couch and onto the rug where he lay. Rick sat mesmerized, afraid to move, gulping back the vomit threatening to erupt from his mouth.

Ramon and Earl Lee unfolded a plastic body bag and began stuffing Luis's corpse into it. When they finished, they zipped it up and carried Luis through the door, one at each end. Rick's knees were jerking so much that he had to put his hands on them and press hard. His breathing was in short gasps.

"Go tomorrow with Ramon, Señor Speed. And get my money." Hector sounded calm. "Everything will be fine. You and I will both go on with our lives, unlike the traitor Luis."

Hector stood and took Constanzia by the arm. "Constanzia will stay in the house now."

After they left, Rick walked across the room on wobbly legs. He leaned on the bar and poured himself a half glass of Dewar's Red Label, then gulped a mouthful and held his breath as it burned a path to his stomach. He instantly grabbed his mouth and ran for the door.

Five minutes later, Rick was still kneeling in the sand of the yard. He rocked back and looked at the giant white moon hanging over the ocean. A light went out in the front of the house. A motor started and red taillights of the Jeep moved along the road.

He stood up, steadied himself against a palm tree, then bent over, and took deep breaths. The fresh air rushed through his lungs, making him light-headed but getting him over the sickness. The vehicle's lights were bouncing farther along the road toward the airstrip.

Ramon and Earl Lee were going to dispose of Luis's body that much was obvious. Rick

shuddered as it crossed his mind that they'd probably dump him in the ocean and let the sharks take care do their job.

He stumbled forward, then broke into a lope, heading across the yard, onto the road, through hanging dust. He sucked in the humid night air, trying to keep from vomiting again. The farther he went away from the house, the faster he ran, until finally he was stumbling, losing his balance and crashing headlong into the sand and stickers along the side of the road. He heaved again, but nothing came up. He needed to rest and gather his wits. Think out his next move.

Ten minutes later, he was trotting again, skirting the pavement of the air strip and trying to see the Beach Baron by moonlight, a half-formed plan in his mind. Then he stopped and listened, breathing deeply, and trying to keep his hands and knees from shaking. The night was quiet--no sounds except the quiet rustling of the palm fronds and a few tree peepers. After two minutes of standing quietly, his breathing was calmed and he felt better; the sickness had receded.

He looked around furtively and didn't see anyone. He quietly opened the door of the Beach Baron and slipped into the left seat, then felt for the ignition. The keys were gone. His plan now destroyed.

He crawled from the airplane, sprinted across the strip and under the palm trees.

The cottage on the other side of Ramon's still had lights showing through the windows. He crept around to the ocean side and knocked softly on the door. The door opened.

"Speed?" Jensen asked.

Rick pushed through the half-open door, stumbled, and fell onto the floor, breathing hard again.

Jensen knelt. "What's the matter?"

"Killed. Luis," he said between gasps.

Jensen moved to the lamps and switched them off. The room went dark. He pulled curtains

back from the front window, letting in moonlight. Rick moved to a chair.

Jensen sat opposite him. "Tell me."

Rick calmed himself and took a deep breath. "After you left, they brought Luis in.

Constanzia shot him."

"Hector means business. How are you going to get the money to him?"

Rick put his head between his knees, taking deep breaths.

"I'll deliver it," Jensen said. "I'll go to Savannah with you and pick it up, then you're clear."

Rick tried to get his thoughts in line.

Jensen continued. "We'll fly out in the morning. You stay here for now. I'll clear it with

Hector. It'll be OK."

Rick's breathing was reaching normal. "You work for him, don't you?"

"No. I'd say it's more like he works for me."

"Drugs?"

"No!" Jensen sounded like the accusation shocked him. "I know what goes on, but I don't touch it. It's for a higher purpose. I don't like it, but it's only a tool."

"To buy the guns?"

"That and other things."

"For--?"

"A free Cuba."

Rick looked at Jensen as if he didn't believe him.

"I know," Jensen said. "Nobody believes. I've heard it all. Cuba's a lost cause. Not worth it. A hundred more. But I've got to go on with what I started."

"You started?"

"When I first joined."

“Shit! I should’ve known! CIA!” Rick almost shouted.

“It doesn’t matter. No one cares anymore. We run around, playing our games, using different names, spouting slogans, conspiring to change the world for the better, of course. But it doesn’t matter anymore.”

“I don’t want to know all this!” Rick raised his voice; afraid he’d knew he’d never get out alive now.

“I told you, it doesn’t matter.” Jensen sounded like he was going to cry.

“Listen! Believe me! I won’t tell anyone--no one!” Rick heard the frightened sound of his own voice and tried to bite back the words.

Jensen sat back and waved a hand at him. “I don’t care. No one would believe you. It’s almost over anyway.”

“What about Luis?”

“Nothing. When it’s all over, Hector’ll go down. We do have some values. We’re not going to let him keep running around loose.” Jensen tilted his head, like he was talking to a child.

“What about me?”

“I’ll get you out in the morning. You have to give me the money, though. We can use it for the operation.”

“Sure, sure. That’s fine. You can go to Savannah with me.”

“Good.” Jensen nodded his head absently. “Good.”

* * *

Two hours later, Rick found the digital clock in the moonlit blackness. The red numbers

burned through the dark. Four-ten. His neck was stiff from sleeping in the chair. Jensen snored, stretched out on the bed, fully clothed, holding a thirty-eight snub nose.

Rick thought over the deal he'd made with Jensen before they'd sacked out. He felt stupid. How could he trust the CIA, especially when they were in business with a drug dealer and killer. Why wouldn't Jensen just pop a shot into his brain when he handed over the money. That way, there'd be no chance of the government ever being embarrassed. Take out the witness, close the case. The more he thought it over, the more stupid he felt. He couldn't trust anybody on this island, they were all the enemy. His only choice was to get away and the airplane was his best shot. He didn't need Jensen. He could fly it to Florida, meet up with Morrow and help the cops locate this island. The murder charge crossed his mind, but he shunted it aside. He'd handle that later. Right now, he convinced himself, he had to get out of here.

Rick tried to ease the pistol out of Jensen's hand, but he awoke with a start, a snore catching in his throat.

Rick jumped onto the bed, smashing a hard right into Jensen's temple and grabbing for the pistol with his left hand as Jensen rolled over and fell to the floor. The gun clattered onto the floor with him. Rick followed him headlong off the bed, crashing into him again and hitting him with his fists. Jensen kicked and flailed with his arms, knocking Rick off him. Rick scrabbled around on the floor. His hand closed around the pistol, and he immediately pushed himself away and crawled backward, out of reach. He brought the pistol up and cocked the hammer. Jensen was still on the floor, on his knees, blood trickling from his nose.

Rick got up, keeping the pistol pointed toward him. "Get on the bed." His voice shaking, his breath coming in gasps.

Jensen crawled back onto the bed. "What the fuck are you doing?"

"I don't trust you anymore than the rest of them."

“You dumb-ass! I’m the only one can get you out of this!” Jensen almost shouted.

“I’ll get myself out!”

“How?”

“Give me the keys to the airplane.”

“You get nothing.”

“Don’t tempt me, I’d just as soon blow your ass away,” Rick waved the gun at him.

“Yeah. Right, and bring everyone down on you.”

Rick picked up a pillow and stuck the gun into it, keeping it pointed at Jensen. “They won’t hear with this over it.”

Jensen looked at him. “You won’t shoot.”

“Don’t try me.”

“We’ve got a stalemate.”

Rick bit his lip and thought a second. “OK, you go with me. We get the money, and I’m clear; but we leave tonight before anyone can stop us.”

“Now you’re making sense.” Jensen got off the bed.

“I keep the gun though!” Rick said.

“No problem.”

Rick motioned to the door. “You first.”

Jensen picked up a bag near the door and started to leave. Rick stepped close behind him and brought the pistol butt hard against the back of his head. Jensen’s knees buckled beneath him, and he dropped, lying halfway out the door.

Rick fumbled through his pockets and found a set of keys, kept searching and found one other key on a chain. He pocketed both sets.

Rick stepped over Jensen, out the door, and across the sand toward the palms.

At the same time, Ramon stepped around the corner of the building. "I thought you might be here." His voice cut through the air.

The sight and sound of him made Rick jump. Then he pushed the thirty-eight toward Ramon's shadow and pulled the trigger. The gun roared, and fire spat from the barrel. The flash caused him to see pinpoints of light dancing in front of his face. He ran toward the palm trees before the noise had faded. He could hear Ramon cursing behind him. Rick snapped another shot over his shoulder in Ramon's direction. He heard it splinter wood.

Rick made it to the palms just as the Jeep's motor started behind the cottage. He could hear voices behind him, in the distance. He kept running, heading toward the airstrip, swatting palmetto leaves and low-hanging palm fronds out of his way, holding the pistol tight in his hand.

Rick burst onto the airstrip, a football field ahead of the Jeep. Its headlights caught him just as he reached the middle of the strip, roaring after him.

Rick aimed the pistol just a little above the oncoming lights and pulled the trigger. The gun bucked and the headlights swerved, then both winked out. Rick sprinted across the strip and climbed into the Baron's cockpit.

The fuel gauges still pegged on full when he switched on the ignition.

The left engine turned over in the first three seconds. The right engine coughed and kicked over in three and a half. Rick slammed the door shut, released the brakes and pushed both throttles forward. The engines roared in unison and the plane moved forward onto the tarmac strip. He aimed the aircraft along the white center line, adjusted the flaps and pushed both throttles full blast.

* * *

“What the hell’s he doing in the airplane?” Ramon whispered to Earl Lee, as he slammed the gearshift into first and popped the clutch, spraying sand and fishtailing back onto the strip. He flicked the lights on again. Earl Lee slammed a clip into the Mac-10 and jacked a round into the chamber.

“Cut him off,” Earl Lee yelled.

The Jeep sped along the tarmac two hundred feet behind the airplane. Ramon stomped the accelerator and gained half the space. Earl Lee stood up, leaning over the windshield, the sling for his right arm flapping in the wind behind him.

The Jeep chased the plane down the strip. The airplane’s nose started to lift. Earl Lee sprayed the right wing with a burst from the Mac-10.

Holes dotted the wing and fuel sprayed onto the runway, trailing after the plane. Earl Lee blasted beneath the airplane and the right tire blew, pieces of rubber flew into the air as the airplane settled on the burst tire. The Jeep’s rear tires slipped a little as they hit the wet pavement of the strip, following the plane.

The engines lost power and the right landing gear snapped, dropping the plane’s right wing to the ground. The airplane started spinning; sparks illuminated the dark runway and ignited the spilled gasoline.

Ramon saw the bright orange flame roaring toward them.

Earl Lee screamed and jammed himself into the seat.

Ramon twisted the wheel and skidded on the slick pavement, turning a complete circle and stopping on the dirt shoulder of the strip.

The column of fire swept past them, blasting them with heat, leaving a sizzle in their ears; passing them with the force of a jet engine, singing their eyebrows and scorching hair and clothes.

They scrambled out of the Jeep, threw themselves on the ground and rolled over and over

through the sand spurs, scraping against limestone, coral and shells.

The fire flickered down, as fast as it had come at them. The Jeep's tires were burning.

Earl Lee stood, brushing his arms and feeling his hair. It was no more than stubble.

"Damned! Burned my hair off." He kept running his hand through the small amount of hair left on his head.

Ramon patted what remained of his shirt, putting out a small flame. He felt his face and checked his arms and legs.

Earl Lee, rubbing the stubble of his hair, looked down the tarmac strip. His hair was singed to the length of a cocklebur, stubby and brown. His smoking shirt hung in strips.

The fire gave its last flicker, the moonlight gaining ascendancy again except for the burning Jeep.

"It's gone," Earl Lee said. "How'd he get it off the ground?"

"It's not gone."

Earl Lee rubbed his arm, looking for the sling and not finding it.

Ramon started walking toward the end of the runway. Fifty feet of scarred sand and limestone separated the end of the strip from the drop-off into the sea.

The airplane had swirled off the pavement, tearing across the sand and over the cliff as a flat, spinning disk. Slamming into the surf, onto the narrow beach at the bottom of the twenty-five foot drop, it had left the flames behind and now swayed to and fro on the beach. The left wing lay ten feet away and the props on both engines were bent and twisted. The airplane's fuselage was broken behind the cabin.

There was a muffled, whump behind them, and they both watched the remains of the Jeep shower onto the runway three hundred feet away.

Ramon and Earl Lee climbed down the embankment. Nothing moved except the airplane on

the surf, bobbing, in the wash of the waves.

Ramon pulled on the left door. It opened with a loud screech. Rick Speed was strapped in the seat, slumped over the wheel, barely breathing. Blood dripped from his nose.

CHAPTER 30

“Your boy’s flown the coop,” McDonald said.

James Morrow shuffled through reports strewn over his desk, trying to ignore him.

“Whattaya think, Jim?” Rivera asked.

Morrow looked up. “I don’t know. I don’t think we could’ve played it any other way. If he’s gone though, I’ll find his ass, and then it’s mine.”

“Still keeping him confidential?” McDonald asked.

Morrow continued ignoring him. McDonald had been pressing for the name of his CI harder as each day passed. Morrow didn’t trust the guy. There was no reason he should know the identity of the CI, none at all.

“Yeah,” Rivera finally said.

“Play it your way.” McDonald shrugged his shoulders and showing them he was just a little pissed off.

“We could do some looking,” Morrow said. “Like running down some information on this

group.” He dropped the Hometown section of the Miami Herald onto the desk. “This guy,” he said, pointing to Carlos mas Palmas’s photo, “is involved with the Oceania Sud. My CI said the FCCL was a buyer, and Mr. mas Palmas is the chief executive of the FCCL. We need to know more.”

“Not a good idea,” McDonald said.

“Why not?” Rivera asked.

“If mas Palmas is a front and we go in on him, we tip our hand,” McDonald said. “They’re warned, and we’ve blown it.”

“Okay. So?” Morrow asked.

McDonald sat on the edge of the desk. “We do some looking into Affianta. No direct contact, just nosing around, keeping a low profile--mostly surveillance, taking photos. See who he’s with. Maybe we’ll find your CI again.”

“I like that,” Rivera said.

“See,” McDonald continued, being the teacher, “mas Palmas is clean, as far as we know. Affianta, on the other hand, is out on bond, facing a large drug charge. We stay on his tail, nobody’s gonna say nothing.”

“It’ll work.” Morrow was relieved they were off the subject of his CI’s identity.

* * *

It felt like the right side slumped. Rick thought he felt the wing drop as he tried to open his eyes. They were glued shut, but he managed to get them open on the second try. He was surprised to see Hector standing with his foot on the edge of a bed, leaning on his knee, his arm extended toward Rick’s face. Then Rick’s eyes focused and he stared into the dark hole of a gun barrel, glanced to the side and saw Jensen seated on the other edge of the bed. It finally sunk in that he

was lying between them. He faintly remembered the airplane twisting out of control, then blackness until now.

“You dumb-ass,” Jensen said.

Rick tried to sit up, but he collapsed onto the bed, the pain in his chest squeezing air from his lungs as Hector pushed the gun barrel against his forehead.

“You’d better not be moving around. You probably got some cracked ribs and a concussion,” Jensen said.

Rick croaked a sound and Jensen poured a glass of water, then held it for him. After he sipped, Rick sank against the pillows.

Hector put the gun barrel in the middle of his forehead again. “You tell me one reason why I shouldn’t blow your fucking head off.”

“You’re more trouble than you’re worth. My damned plane’s trashed,” Jensen snapped.

Rick raised a hand to push the pistol away. Hector bounced his foot on the bed and slapped his hand. A red curtain of pain drew unfocused across Rick’s eyes. Hector pushed Rick’s head into the pillow with the barrel and cocked the hammer. Rick gritted his teeth and squeezed his eyes shut in anticipation of the explosion.

“You blow him away, we lose the money.” He heard Jensen say.

Hector shouted. “I’m tired of this miserable shit! He goes now! Fuck the money! I can get more where that came from!”

“Hector! We need the money. Take that gun away. We need to talk. It’s important!” Jensen shouted back.

“Fuck you! I’m going to kill the bastard.” Hector bounced the bed with his foot, holding the gun against Rick’s forehead.

Rick felt the rifleing where it ended at the muzzle. He could picture the bullet rocketing down

the barrel, through his skin and skull and exploding into his brain. As the bed bounced, he bit his lip, but kept his eyes closed, waiting.

“I said, put the gun down!”

Hector was breathing heavily, but the gun didn’t move from Rick’s forehead.

“Listen!” Jensen said. “We need that money. More than you know. The agency wouldn’t give me enough to complete this mission. Believe me, we need that money.”

Hector looked across at him, then slowly, Rick could feel the pistol drop from his forehead, trail across his face then to his chest. Rick kept his eyes closed.

“Uncock it!” Jensen said, louder than before.

Rick could still hear Hector’s heavy breathing.

“I told you it’s important,” Jensen kept on.

Rick cracked his eyelids open.

He saw Hector grip his thumb around the hammer, tilt the gun back in his hand, and uncock it. Hector stepped back and sat in a chair, throwing his feet on the bed. Rick gritted his teeth at the pain burning through his chest as the bed moved again.

“Thanks,” Jensen breathed. “I haven’t really had time to explain it before. That shit in Washington cut the project. I got some money from contacts inside, but it’s not enough to finish. We gotta have it all done in eight months, ’cause after that, the project’s closed. They gave me only ninety grand, and you and I both know that’s not enough.”

“Why didn’t you say something before?” Hector asked, surprised.

“Because, I’ve been trying to raise funds other ways.”

“I still should kill the smart ass.”

“It’s counterproductive.” Jensen lighted a cigarette and took a long draw.

Hector jostled the bed again with his foot. Rick groaned.

“You hear that, you mierda!” Hector hollered at Rick, shaking the bed again. “You’d better stay out of my sight, and you’d better get the money to Jensen. You don’t, he won’t stop me the next time. Comprende?” Hector shook the bed one more time, then got up and slammed the door as he left.

“That was close,” Rick croaked.

“You’re lucky you don’t have a hole in your head,” Jensen agreed.

“Why’d you talk him out of it?”

“I told you, we can use that money.”

Rick groaned as he moved to sit up.

“I don’t want you screwing around,” Jensen said. “Just lie still. When you can move, we’re going to Savannah and getting the cash. In the meantime, don’t cause problems.”

“You don’t give a damn they killed Ortenzia?”

“Fuck Ortenzia. Fuck anybody gets in the way,” Jensen said.

“You’re as bad as they are.”

“Bullshit! I have a higher purpose. Millions of people are still oppressed by Communism in Cuba.” Jensen stood up and starting pacing. “Goddamn it! Right at our back door! It’s disgraceful! We should be ashamed that we’ve let it go on this long! Castro’s gotta go. Russia’s closed down. He’s the only important one left. He’s the last Commie.”

“Why don’t you just wait for him to die?”

“That’s the easy way.” Jensen stopped pacing and sat in the chair next to the bed.

Rick watched him, trying to decide if Jensen believed what he was saying. Maybe the guy was sincere. Maybe he just lost sight of what’s right because he really wants to do something good. Rick wondered if Jensen knew that idealism usually kills the idealist.

“So what if it’s easy?” he finally asked.

“So, I retire in eight months. It’s got be done before then.”

“Why?”

Jensen looked at him, then rubbed his eyes. “I’ll complete the project,” he choked. “I started it and I’ll complete it. I couldn’t live if I didn’t finish it.”

Rick looked at him, expecting to see him cry.

* * *

“Affianta’s in town,” McDonald said to the group in front of him, including the Chief of Detectives. “We spotted him. There’s activity at his house, and he’s been to his car lot.”

The five detectives were draped across five chairs in the squad room, and the chief leaned on a desk.

“When’s his next court date?” Rivera asked.

“Next Wednesday,” McDonald said. “He’s got an arraignment on the possession and trafficking charges.”

“Let’s keep a tail on him then,” Morrow said. “In the meantime, shouldn’t we watch mas Palmas?”

“Still a bad idea,” McDonald said.

“Just a laid back surviel,” Rivera suggested.

“It’s a bad idea,” McDonald said to the Chief of Detectives. “He’s got connections, and we got nothing on him. It’s too risky. Could hurt everyone if we screw up.”

The chief looked around the room. “Leave him out of it. We got nothing on him anyway. Keep on with the druggie.”

The phone next to Morrow’s hand rang. He put it to his ear.

“Morrow. I ain’t got much time.”

Static rustled in the background. Morrow turned his back to the group. “Where are you?”

“Oyster Cay, in the Bahamas. Listen, the CIA is definitely involved.”

“Not a surprise. What else?”

“I got a way to Miami. I’ll be there in a couple of weeks.”

“Then?”

“I’ll call. Gotta go,” Rick ended with a whisper.

Morrow turned around. “My CI says the spooks are involved.”

McDonald and Robbin looked at each other, then at everyone else.

“Spooks?” Robbin asked.

“CIA,” Morrow said.

Everyone was silent for a few seconds.

“So what?” McDonald asked.

“Yeah. So what?” Robbin echoed.

CHAPTER 31

Rick stood, hands on his hips, breathing hard. He flexed his back and stretched his arms above his head. Gulls screeched overhead, congregating in front of him, looking for a handout.

For the last two weeks, on every other day, he'd been running on the beach, starting out with five-minute runs and gradually building himself back up to forty-five minutes. His back, neck and ribs were still tender, but the major soreness was almost gone. He still had his ribs wrapped and his head felt as if it were splitting open after every run, but he could tell he was mending.

After the wake up call by Hector, Jensen had been the only one around. Hectors help brought Rick's meals but never said anything. He didn't care. He asked Ramon about the running when he came by the bungalow two days ago. Ramon told him to go ahead, but not to touch the boat; it was wired. Rick didn't want to take a chance on that either. Besides, the way he understood it, Jensen was his safe-conduct pass, and the money was the carrot that kept Jensen on his side.

He wiped his hands on his shorts, took a deep breath of the warm, sea-scented air, and started again, trotting through the sand toward the bungalow. Jensen, from the patio wearing a white Panama hat and sunglasses, watching him; Rick landed on the patio wall, waiting for Jensen to say something.

"Just because you're feeling better, don't get any ideas." Jensen sipped something from a glass.

Rick waved and ran his hands backward through his hair.

Jensen continued. "One more fuck-up, and you're dead meat. I won't be able to save your ass again."

"Yeah, yeah." Rick waved him away.

"I mean it. Hectors a live wire about you. He's ready to feed you to the sharks."

"Like they did Luis?"

Jensen sat forward and motioned with his hands, "I don't know anything about Luis."

"You know. You just wish you didn't."

"I know that Hectors coming back tomorrow night, and I'm getting you out of here before that. We're going to Miami, then to Savannah and get the money. Then you're out of it."

"Are we going in the boat?"

"Since you trashed my plane---"

“Who’s driving?” Rick asked.

“Ramon and Earl Lee.”

“Do you trust them?”

“Of course,” Jensen said.

“I don’t know,” Rick said.

“You don’t worry. I’ll take care of it. Be ready to leave at four.”

Rick watched him walk away, then he packed his travel bag and loaded a tape recorder with a mini cassette. He was sitting on the patio again at four when Ramon, Earl Lee, and Jensen drove up in the Jeep.

* * *

The blue water rolled in four-foot waves. The Cigarette was doing about twenty, hitting the troughs every once in a while, jarring Rick’s teeth and causing a dull ache in the middle of his head and chest. Earl Lee sat across from him on the other bunk, the table between them plugged into the socket on the floor. Earl Lee drained the Cristal beer and threw the bottle into a trash bin bolted to the floor. Rick sipped on another beer. He slipped his hand into the right front pocket of his cut-off jeans and pressed a button on the tape recorder; then he sat forward and held the bottle with both hands.

“How’s your arm?” Rick asked.

Earl Lee flexed his right arm over his head and back down to his side, saying, “It’s OK. It ain’t hardly stiff no more.”

“Hector wanted me to go with you to the parking garage, right?”

“Right,” Earl Lee said, faking a smile.

“How come?”

“Hey! Mr. A don’t tell me his plans.”

“Come on, you and Ramon talk.”

“Yeah, we talk,” Earl Lee admitted.

The whomp-whomp of the boat hitting the troughs intruded during the silence. Rick gritted his teeth each time. Take it easy, he told himself. Rick needed Earl Lee on tape, he knew he could never get Ramon to talk; but he might get Earl Lee bragging and blowing, then he just might give him something.

“Damn!” Rick said. “I wish he’d slow down. I got a headache that’s killing me.”

“Pussy.” Earl Lee said, smileing.

Rick smiled back, tipped up the beer bottle and drained it. “Yeah, I like it, so what?” Rick grinned now.

“I didn’t mean, did you like it. I mean you’re a pussy, a wimp,” Earl Lee said.

“Why you wanta be mean, Earl Lee? Hey! Is Earl Lee your real name, or you just make that up?”

“So what? Was my daddy’s name too.”

“I got my daddy’s name. Mine’s Richard J. Speed, the third. His was Richard J. Speed, the second.”

“You rich?” Earl Lee asked.

“Hell no. My granddaddy was, though. Owned a shipping company in Savannah. Turned it over to my dad when he died.”

“Then you got rich?”

“My dad and mom drank a lot, spent all the money. They were killed in a car wreck, right before I graduated law school. All the money and the business, gone.”

“My granddad never owned nothing, ‘cept a lot of kids,” Earl Lee said. “But that’s OK. We did OK.”

It was funny, but for an instant, Rick saw Earl Lee as a multi-dimensional person, with a family and friends. They were both quiet for a while. Rick took a breath and pushed on, gently.

“Why’d Mr. A want me to go with you to the garage?”

Earl Lee looked at him. “Ramon says he wanted to com-pro-mise you.” Earl Lee enunciated the word.

Rick spoke quietly. “Get me hooked, so I couldn’t get out, huh?”

Earl Lee sneered, not even faking the smile any longer. “Get you deeper in the Snowzone. Once you’re in, you can’t get out again.” He said the last words in a singsong fashion, rocking with the rhythm.

“Aren’t you concerned, going back to Miami, murder warrant and all?”, Rick asked.

“Won’t be there long enough to worry about it. One night, maybe.”

“Where you going?”

“South. Way South. Till things cool off.”

“South America?”

“Don’t worry ‘bout it,” Earl Lee said, suddenly becoming cautious.

Rick sniffed. “None of my business anyway.”

“Right!” Earl Lee flexed his arm again.

The boat slowed, no longer pounding through the waves. Now it was rolling with them. The engines picked up a little. Rick’s head was drumming loudly, and his ribs were tender when he breathed.

“Coming into the channel,” Earl Lee said.

“Earl Lee, tell me something?”

“What?”

“Why’d you run over that cop in the garage?”

Earl Lee looked at him, eyelids drooping. He sucked on his teeth as he thought about it.

Finally, “Seemed like the right thing to do at the time.”

“You wanted to kill him?”

“Yep. It was him or me.”

“How’d you figure that?” Rick asked.

“Well hell; he was shooting at us, wasn’t he? I wasn’t shooting at him, the son of a bitch.”

Rick’s previous assessment of Earl Lee as a normal person, weakened.

“They got a murder warrant on me, too.”

“Life’s a bitch, ain’t it?”

Earl Lee climbed to the deck, leaving Rick alone. Rick felt in his right front pocket and stopped the tape recorder. He leaned back and propped the soles of his feet against the table edge. Indistinct voices filtered from the deck. When he was sure no one was coming, he transferred the recorder from his pocket to his clothes bag and closed the zipper.

* * *

Two hours later, Rick stuck his head in the living room of Constanzia’s house and told Jensen he was going to take a shower. Jensen continued talking on the phone. They were the only ones in the house. Ramon and Earl Lee would be along later.

Alone in the bedroom, Rick pulled a travel bag from under the bed. He held still and checked for Jensen’s voice again. When he heard him talking on the phone, Rick pulled the zipper. The cellular phone was still inside. He put a towel over it, slipped into the bathroom and closed the

door, slipping the Chinese hat lock on the knob.

He threw a towel across the bottom of the doorsill, turned on the shower and got in, holding the phone at the far end, away from the water.

He dialed Morrow's number and held his breath, counting three rings.

"Miami P.D., Detectives."

"James Morrow, please," Rick said.

"Not here. Who's this?"

Silence. He could see the cop in his mind, a question crossing his face, then recognition, now hunching forward over the desk, shielding the conversation, because when he spoke, it was almost a whisper. "Where can he get you?"

"He can't."

"Shit!"

"Tell him I got something for him," Rick whispered.

"How about the same place as before?"

"I can't," Rick said.

"Call that phone then."

"I can't," Rick repeated.

"Shit!" the voice said again.

"Tell him I'll call back with an address in Hollywood," Rick said.

"Florida, right?" Rivera asked.

Rick grinned. "Right." He punched the end button on the phone.

Rick shut off the shower and dried, then wrapped the phone in the towel and opened the door. Jensen was in mid stride to the bathroom door and looking him in the face.

"Jesus Christ!" Rick exclaimed, clutching the towel over his groin and stumbling backward.

“What are you, a pervert?”

Jensen shouldered past him. “Get outta my way. I wasn’t peeping. I gotta take a leak.”

Rick sat on the edge of the bed and listened for Jensen in the bathroom. Maybe Jensen had heard him on the cell phone, even with the shower on. Then he heard a steady stream hitting the water in the toilet.

He quickly pulled his bag out from under the bed and stuffed the cell phone in, pushing it all the way to the bottom, under other clothing. He was pulling on a pair of jeans, when Jensen opened the door to the bathroom.

“Too late,” Rick said. “I already got my pants on.”

Jensen didn’t smile as he went through the door of the bedroom.

* * *

Morrow was pissed, at himself mostly. Rivera said the CI had called two hours before and he hadn’t been available.

“You couldn’t have known he was going to call,” Rivera said.

“I should have been here.” Morrow slammed a desk drawer closed.

“He’ll call back.”

“You said he was whispering, right?”

“Right,” Rivera said.

“Then he may not be able to call back,” Morrow said.

“Maybe not. I didn’t think about it.”

“Damn!” Morrow stood up for the fifth time and paced around his desk.

“What now?” Rivera asked.

“Now,” Morrow said, “We wait and hope.”

As soon as Morrow had said it, the phone rang. He knocked the receiver off the hook trying to pick it up. He fumbled it to his ear and conked himself on the head.

“Morrow!” he hollered, then held his breath.

“Go to 1629 Canal Street in Hollywood.” Rick paused. “Florida.” Then he chuckled.

“Cut the shit!” Morrow raised his voice.

“Look in the bed in the master bedroom, between the mattress and springs,” Rick went on, “there’s a minitape. It’ll clear me on the parking-garage thing.”

“What else?” Morrow asked.

“Be careful. Earl Lee’s there. He’s armed. Tonight’s his last night in town, then you won’t find him again.”

“We’ll get his ass.”

“Good luck,” Rick said, then the dial tone buzzed in Morrow’s ear.

Morrow turned to Rivera. “Get the chief. We gotta go get Henry Pace’s killer.”

* * *

At three-thirty in the afternoon, just one hour and forty minutes after he received Rick Speed’s call, James Morrow, Sanders and Rivera turned onto Canal Street in Hollywood and pulled to the curb. Morrow squeezed the mike button on his hand-held radio. “Tac One. Tac Two in place.”

“Ten-four,” the radio crackled back.

The Chief of Detectives was one block west and one block over. A SWAT Team was standing by in a van one block east and one block over. Robbin and McDonald were one block east, on Broward Road.

“Tac Two, go on and give it a look,” the chief said. “Everyone else, keep clear air. No radio traffic.”

Morrow eased the unmarked, ‘87 Ford into the middle of the street and started counting houses, looking for 1629.

“Should be two doors up,” Rivera said.

Sanders pointed. “The pink stucco.”

Morrow eased past the house. “See anything?” he asked.

“Nope,” one said.

“Nothing,” another said.

He pulled to the curb and picked up the radio. “Tac One. No activity.”

“Ten-four, Tac Two. Hold your position. All other units, get into final position, then check in.”

Morrow looked at his watch. Three thirty-seven. One by one, the units checked in. Morrow looked at his watch again. Three-forty.

Tac One came on the air again. “Tac Two, mosey on down to the house. We’ve got you in sight. Put your earphone in and keep the radio under cover.”

Sanders, Morrow, and Rivera got out of the car. They wore street clothes. Three different shirts, three different colors. Sanders had a hat, and Rivera tied a blue farmer’s handkerchief around his head, Indian style. The Kevlar bulletproof vests each wore caused sweat to trickle down their backs.

As they drew abreast of the house, Tac One came on the radio, blaring in Morrow’s ear, “Move it!--Move it!--Move it!”

All three drew their guns and ran to the front door, just as a pair of SWAT’s reached it, slamming a steel battering ram through the door. Morrow, Sanders, and Rivera pushed past, guns drawn, raised and cocked, swarming into the house, seeing a startled Earl Lee getting up from the

couch, hand reaching for a .357 Magnum three inches from the tips of his fingers. His mouth set in a grim line, looking like he was going to shoot it out with them.

Morrow fired a round into the ceiling, yelling, "Police! On the floor!"

More crashing noises came from the rear of the house as the SWAT team swarmed through the back door and into the kitchen.

Morrow watched Earl Lee over the sights of his .38 Smith and Wesson Air weight and assessed the situation quickly. He cocked the double-action hammer and centered the pistol on Earl Lee's chest. Earl Lee hesitated, then settled back, a smile on his lips. He slowly raised his hands, leaving the Magnum undisturbed.

Morrow put his Air weight a half inch from Earl Lee's nose. "I said, on the Floor!"

Earl Lee moved laconically. The laziest person in the world. No quick moves, nothing to scare anybody.

Rivera darted in below Morrow's pistol and snapped handcuffs around Earl Lee's wrists. Earl Lee winced but said nothing.

They lifted him from the floor by his arms.

The Chief of Detectives came blowing through the door, stepping over splintered wood and pushing away the last hanging piece of the frame. "This our man?"

"It's him," Morrow said. Rivera agreed.

"Read him his rights," the chief said.

Rivera started explaining Earl Lee's rights to him. Morrow went through the hall and into the bedroom, hugging the walls and pushing his pistol in front of him. The bedroom was empty. He lifted the mattress, throwing it onto the floor. A small cassette lay on the spring covers.

CHAPTER 32

Earl Lee sat at a small table in a windowless room. The tabletop had burn marks all around the edges where other detainees had laid their cigarettes. He lighted his sixth cigarette and inhaled deeply. Sanders, seated opposite Earl Lee, waved the smoke away as it swirled around his head.

"You're gonna fry, partner," Sanders told him. "Killing a cop gets you the death penalty."

"I didn't kill no cop," Earl Lee drawled.

"You don't remember? Eastside parking garage. You were selling some coke. Tore the hell out of the building in your car, ran over and killed Henry Pace doing it."

"Must've been somebody else," Earl Lee said.

"We saw you, asshole!" Sanders shouted, half rising from his chair.

"Not me." Earl Lee was shaking his head.

The door opened, and James Morrow walked in. He pulled a chair out and sat next to Sanders, facing Earl Lee.

Earl Lee looked from one to the other. "OK. What now? Good cop, bad cop? I'm gonna be scared cause you're the psycho cop." Looking at Morrow as he spoke. "Ready to blow me away, right here in the po-lice station, too." He turned to Sanders. "And you're gonna save me so I'll be grateful and spill my guts." He smirked at their frowns.

Morrow set a tape recorder on the table and pressed the play button.

The spools turned, and Earl Lee's voice filled the room, "Seemed like the right thing to do at the time."

“You wanted to kill him?” the spool ticked.

“Yep. It was him or me.”

“How’d you figure that?”

“Well, hell; he was shooting at us, wasn’t he? I wasn’t shooting at him, the son of a bitch.”

Morrow punched the stop button with one finger. He looked at Earl Lee. “Just a sample. We got you. Like he said, you’re gonna fry.”

Earl Lee’s face went gray. He stubbed out the cigarette, folded his hands in front of him on the table, and asked, “Whatta you want?”

“What have you got?” Sanders asked.

After they set up the tape recorders, Earl Lee talked and answered questions for more than an hour. When they were finished, he asked, “What can you do for me?”

“We didn’t make any deals,” Morrow reminded him.

“And I didn’t ask for any before I started talking,” Earl Lee said. “I just told you everything, without any promises, without any deals. That’s got to be worth something.”

“We’ll put in a word. You plead guilty to murder one, save the state a lot of money, rat out everyone else on the stand. Maybe the DA will let you have life.”

Both cops could see Earl Lee’s mind working. A life sentence in Florida meant about seven years, then he’d walk; they both knew that. They hated it, but getting everyone else would be just as good. They’d have everybody on murder one.

“I appreciate it,” Earl Lee said. “Of course, you put me into general population, I won’t be in long. I’ll be dead.”

“That’s your problem,” Sanders said.

“Now who’s being the hard ass?” Earl Lee asked.

“Get the DA,” Morrow said.

* * *

Thirty minutes later Earl Lee looked up as assistant district attorney Dell Thomas walked into the interrogation room. Nice-looking boy, neat hair, nice suit. He leaned against the wall, looking like he had said, “Hey, I’m doing you a favor,” but he didn’t say anything.

“Earl Lee is going to cooperate with--“ Morrow started, when Earl Lee interrupted.

“Already cooperated.”

Morrow continued. “Right, already cooperated . . . and will cooperate as much as needed.” Morrow inclined his head toward Earl Lee.

Earl Lee lighted a cigarette.

“He’ll plead to murder one on Henry Pace for a life sentence, no death penalty. He’ll testify and do whatever,” Morrow said.

“That’ll fly,” Dell Thomas said.

“There’s a problem,” Morrow said. “He gets put into general population, he’s dead. The guys he’s going to roll over on are people who have connections.”

“What’ll we get on them?” Dell asked.

“Trafficking, conspiracy, arms violations--“ Morrow was saying.

“They snuffed a guy, too,” Earl Lee said.

Morrow raised his eyebrows. “You didn’t mention that before.”

Earl Lee took a deep drag from his smoke, and blew two jets from his nostrils. “Just to sweeten the deal.” He smiled broadly.

Dell Thomas moved closer to the table and pulled out a chair. “We’ll put you in under a different name. We’ll keep you in a small detention center for the first five years, let everything die

down, then you go into general population.”

“How about plastic surgery? You know, make me look like Robert Redford, or Paul Newman when he was young,” Earl Lee asked.

“What you got isn’t that good,” Dell said.

Earl Lee rubbed his chin. “What if I throw in a Senator or two and the CIA?”

“What the hell you doing?” Morrow hollered, jumping up from his chair.

Dell Thomas held up his hand, “If what you say is true and can be confirmed, and you testify in all trials that we may need you in, and if you tell the truth on the stand and don’t perjure yourself, we’ll keep you safe. You’ll be in prison, but we’ll keep you safe.”

“Deal,” Earl Lee said. “When do we start?”

Dell motioned over his shoulder. “Turn on the tape.”

Earl Lee spilled his guts for another two hours and ten minutes. When he finished, he crumpled an empty cigarette pack and asked if anybody had a smoke.

* * *

“We’ve been compromised,” McDonald said into the phone.

“What?” Jensen asked on the other end.

“They got the little one. He spilled his guts, mentioned you, told them about the operation. He’s going to testify. It’s all coming apart, and we can’t do anything about it.”

“How about sanctioning?” Jensen asked.

“I doubt it. He’s guarded.”

Jensen let out a sigh. “Forget it. Go on back. Leave it alone.”

“The boys at base will stonewall for you,” McDonald said.

“Thanks. I appreciate whatever they can do.”

“Good Luck.”

“Yeah.”

McDonald hung up and shrugged his shoulders at Robbin.

“Too bad,” Robbin said.

“Whatever,” McDonald replied. “Let’s sanitize and check in.”

* * *

Jensen put the phone down. Rick thought he looked depressed, sitting on the edge of the motel bed, hands locked in front of him, staring at the floor. The bathroom door was shut, and Rick could hear the fan running. Ramon had taken a magazine in with him ten minutes ago.

Earlier, Jensen checked them into the Holiday Inn in Jacksonville after driving ten hours from Miami.

Jensen finally looked up and let out a deep breath.

“How in the fuck you tip off the cops about Earl Lee?”

Rick felt the pit of his stomach drop away. “What do you mean?” He tried to conceal the tremor in his voice.

“I’m not stupid. I know everything that’s going on. Miami PD got Earl Lee. It had to come from you.” Jensen got up from the bed and looked around the room. He picked up Rick’s travel bag, threw it on the bed and unzipped it.

“Hey!” Rick started.

Jensen pulled the pistol from his waistband and pointed it toward Rick. “Shut up and stay put.”

Rick held his hands in front of him and stayed in his seat, motioning him to take it easy.

“OK. Don’t do anything rash.”

Jensen found the cell phone, then sat in the chair, the gun pointed casually in Rick’s direction.

“You been tipping the cops,” Jensen said matter-of-factly.

“You’ve forgotten who you are,” Rick said, a little louder than a whisper. “When Ramon comes out of that bathroom, you arrest him, and then we’ll both take him in.”

Jensen looked at him blankly.

“Did you hear me?” Rick asked a little louder.

Jensen blinked his eyes. “Too late. It’s too late for that.”

The fan shut off, and the bathroom door opened. Ramon looked at both of them, then placed his hand on the nine-millimeter in his waistband.

Jensen looked at Ramon, and then threw a pair of handcuffs on the bed. “Put them on him, please.” He motioned toward Rick.

“Por que?”

“Put them on him,” Jensen said again, a little firmer this time.

Ramon snapped a handcuff on Rick’s left wrist, then twisted his hands behind his back, snapped the other one and pushed Rick back into the chair.

“What’s the matter?” Ramon asked Jensen.

“The cops got Earl Lee.”

Ramon looked at him, then at Rick.

“He tipped them,” Jensen said.

“What else?”

“My sources say Earl Lee’s made a deal.” Jensen rubbed his temples.

Ramon stood still for a moment, then walked to the phone and dialed a number. He repeated the information about Earl Lee into the phone, and then listened. He nodded a couple of times, saying "Si," then hung up.

"There's been a change of plans." He picked up a pillow from the bed, at the same time smoothly drawing the nine-millimeter from his belt. He took one step toward Rick. Rick cringed back, pushing himself away from oncoming death.

"No! We need the money!" Jensen said.

Swiftly, Ramon turned toward Jensen and with the pistol buried in the pillow, he fired twice. The bullets made a smacking sound on Jensen's chest and knocked him backwards across the bed.

Jensen stumbled to his feet. He had a surprised look on his face. He looked at his chest and crumpled forward, his head hitting the edge of a writing desk and knocking him backward again. When he lay on the floor, face-down, two dark spots on the back of his shirt grew, looking like balloons being inflated.

Rick sat numbly, afraid to move or say anything. Too numbed to move, just watching. Ramon threw the pillow on the bed and stuffed the pistol into his waistband. Grabbing a towel from the bathroom, he wiped all the desks and chairs, then went to the sink and wiped the counter, mirror, and glasses. He went into the bathroom and wiped the bathtub and toilet, including the water tank and flush handle.

He threw the towel on the floor, surveyed the room and carried the two bags to the car. When he came back he grabbed Rick by the arm and shoved him to the door, into the parking lot and the rented 92 Oldsmobile Cutlass. Inside the car he flipped the switch, locking all the doors, and drove through the parking lot and onto Commonwealth Street, turning left to hit the I-295 bypass around Jacksonville.

Rick's hands were shaking. He sat on the edge of the front seat, passenger side. The

handcuffs were so tight that circulation was cut off, and his hands were beginning to tingle.

He squirmed on the seat, trying to get the circulation in his hands started again.

Ramon looked at him. "Put your hands under your ass and lift your legs. You can get your hands in front of you. But don't try nothing."

Rick tried. He rose, slipped his hands as far under him as he could, then sat back and raised his legs, slipping his arms around them. He sat back against the seat, his hands in front of him. He worked his fingers, trying to make the numbness disappear.

"They're going to find him when they clean the room." Rick watched Ramon for a reaction.

"Who cares?"

"Don't you? He probably gave the license tag when he checked in."

Ramon snorted his disgust as they made the turnoff onto Duval Road and headed toward the airport. The car's digital clock read 7:30 P.M. when Ramon parked Jensen's rental car in the long-term parking lot, then locked Rick's arms through the steering wheel.

As he watched Ramon's back headed toward the terminal, Rick looked around hoping to see someone he could signal, get them close to the car and convince them to call the cops. The lot was full of hundreds of cars, but no one was walking close enough to the car to signal. He saw the lights of the terminal passenger bus pass by five or six lanes over.

Rick was still hoping and looking when Ramon returned in a Ford Festiva ten minutes later. He loosed him from the wheel and hustled him into the rental parked behind Jensen's car. Five minutes later Rick gave up all hope of rescue as Ramon eased back onto I-95 and headed for Savannah.

CHAPTER 33

An hour later, Ramon drove through the Krystal at the intersection of Jesup Road and I-95 in Brunswick. They munched on the little hamburgers in silence. Finally Ramon spoke, the first time since they had left the airport in Jacksonville.

“We get to Savannah, I don’t want no shit, understand?”

“What?” Rick asked, stuffing half a miniature hamburger in his mouth, using both hands in unison.

“You’re going to give me the money, then I’m gone.”

“How do I know--“ Rick started.

“That’s the shit I was talking about. You give me the money; I’ll leave you tied up somewhere. You’ll be found in a few hours. Forget all the othershit. It’s not a consideration. You don’t give me the money when we get there; I start cutting off your fingers, one at a time. When I’m done with them, I’ll do your toes, and then I’ll do your dick. If you haven’t given me the money by then, who

cares? You get my point?”

Rick choked on the hamburger and reached for a drink of Coke.

“Other plans have been made,” Ramon said. “And you’re not going to fuck them up.”

Fifteen minutes later the bridge over the Altamaha River loomed ahead, just visible in the headlight glare. Rick thought about it. He gets the money, I’m dead.

Rick had a plan forming in his mind. “I gotta take a leak.”

“Forget it.”

Okay. Time to move on to plan two.

Rick looked behind them in the rearview mirror. A couple of cars, not much traffic. He checked the speedometer: cruise set on sixty-five exactly. Ramon had both hands on the wheel, glancing at him off and on.

Rick checked the road again and then lunged for the steering wheel. He grabbed it with both hands, pulling it toward him. The car veered onto the right shoulder, the traffic nodes making a rat-a-tatting sound.

Ramon cursed him, trying to control the car with one hand, his other hand going to his waist and the nine-millimeter. Rick was crowding in close now, beating Ramon over the head with the cuffs and punching him in the face double-handed. The car swerved back onto the road, another car’s horn blaring a warning as it whizzed past, barely missing them.

Ramon jerked the wheel back to the right. The car cut tracks in the grass on the edge of the road. Rick grabbed for the gun, butted Ramon’s head with the top of his head. Shit! That wouldn’t work, just give him another headache, he thought clearly, keeping his hand moving; grabbing, pulling at anything he could grasp.

He felt his hands close around the butt of the pistol, and then felt it come loose. Rick reared back to the passenger’s door, kicking out with his feet at Ramon, trying to get a better grip on the

pistol. The car swerved back across the two lanes, just missing a Winnebago motor home with a white-haired old guy screaming silently at them through the windshield, with the headlights of Ramon's car blasting him in the face.

Their car went all the way across the highway into the median, fishtailing, kicking up dirt and grass. Rick still kicked with his feet, feeling them make contact with parts of Ramon's body, ribs, shoulder, belly, hip.

He finally managed to get his finger on the trigger of the gun. The roar of the pistol was deafening. The windshield crumpled and blew in on them in large pieces. The car still bumped over the grass, starting to slow.

Rick pulled the door latch and did a back flip out of the car, hitting the grass, the wind knocked out of him. He crawled to his knees; his head, ribs and hips hurting like hell. Pain pierced his consciousness and kept him from passing out. Pinwheels of light danced in front of his eyes. He saw the car heading away from him toward a group of pine trees, and then it suddenly stopped, the headlights shining at each other from around the sides of a tree.

Rick gasped, took deep breaths, and tried to keep from blacking out from pain. He stumbled to his feet, weaving, trying to stand still. Ramon was not moving in the car.

He looked around at cars pulling over on the shoulder of the Interstate. A young man came running from one, looking concerned and carrying a fishing tackle box in his hand. He grabbed Rick's arm.

"Here! Lie down! I'm a paramedic!"

Rick sank to his knees again. Then the man saw the handcuffs. Rick sensed his hesitation, and then pointed to the car. "I'm OK. You'd better help him." Rick finally got enough air in his lungs to talk and pointed toward Ramon in the car crumpled against the tree.

The paramedic looked him over, and then ran toward Ramon, sitting slumped over, just the

top of his head visible over the door window.

Rick struggled to his feet again, turned his back toward the cars stopping along the way and started walking toward the car and Ramon, angling toward the trees in the median. As he came abreast of the trees, still fifty feet from the car, he saw Ramon move. The paramedic was over him, trying to fit a neck brace on him. Ramon swatted at him. Blood covered his face. The interior lights dimmed and went out just as Ramon looked at Rick. Rick knew he couldn't see him from that far away, but he felt he could anyway. Then he remembered that he had the gun in his hand when he went out the door. At least Ramon wouldn't be shooting at him.

Rick knew he couldn't hang around. He still had a murder warrant out on him and when the police investigated, they'd run his identification through the crime information computer. Bingo! They'd chuckle about how smart they were to have captured a wanted murderer. He knew there would be no chance to explain and he couldn't complete his plan sitting in a jail cell, trying to straighten out the mess. He had to get away and complete the plan.

He ducked into the underbrush among the trees and ran. Tree limbs swatted him in the face as he stumbled and fell. He got to his feet and started running again, this time holding his arms in front to ward off the brush and tree limbs. A muted siren wailed in the distance.

* * *

Two hours later Rick was winded. He hurt all over. He felt like he'd never recuperate. After fighting his way through the trees and underbrush, he crossed the southbound lane of I-95 and struck out cross-country, fighting his way through underbrush and tree falls. Finally, he rested at the base of an oak tree that must have been more than two hundred years old. It was at least thirty feet around. The limbs drooped over neat rows of young planted pines. He sat with his back

against the rough bark, staring into the pitch black of the night.

The night was quiet--no sirens, no flashing lights, no one thrashing through the woods after him.

He massaged a cramp out of his right calf, stood up, paced around and then set out along an old timber trail, following it between the symmetric rows of baby pines.

Another hour and Rick saw a light off to his right. He left the timber trail and traversed a field of two-year old pines. The tops of the young trees slapped at his legs as he walked and he could smell the turpentine of the pinesap.

He came to the edge of the field, took another sighting on the distant pinpoint of light, and crawled across a cattle fence, trying to maintain his balance and finding it hard to do with both hands cuffed in front.

He walked across an open field, watching the light grow larger and was surprised by a barking dog standing on the back porch of a small house. It barked two or three more times, then threw its head back and gave a long, quavering, howl.

A door opened and Rick heard a deep voice. "Who's out there?" the voice asked.

"Hello?" Rick called.

A black man stepped through the door as Rick walked closer. The man held a lantern high in the air with his right hand. Rick moved slowly, bunching the muscles in his legs and preparing to run if needed.

As he closed on the house, he saw it was covered with black tar paper going to gray. The black man was older, his hair shot with gray and he was dressed in faded blue bib coveralls.

"Shetup Coon!" the man hollered at the dog. The dog looked at him, then at Rick, circled and lay down, positioning itself to go back to sleep.

As Rick came closer to the porch, he heard a soft snap and then saw the shotgun in the

man's hands. "Hi. I'm looking for a phone. Sorry to disturb you."

"Come over here in the light, so I can see."

"Yes sir." Rick stepped forward, turning sideways to the man, trying to keep his cuffed hands away from the light.

"Got a phone?" Rick asked.

The black man looked him over closely. "What you standing that way fer?"

"I had some trouble earlier. I need a phone."

"C'mere." The man nudged Rick around to face him, seeing the reflection of the porch light on the cuffs.

"You an escaped convict?"

"No, sir. I was being kidnapped by a criminal, but I got away. He handcuffed me." Rick held his hands up.

"The law want you?"

Rick blew out a breath. Shit. "Most likely." And that was probably the truth. "At least listen to me before you do anything, OK?"

The man lowered the shotgun. "Come on in."

He stood aside and let Rick into the house. "Sit." He motioned to a table in the center of the room. "Now, what's gwine on?"

Rick gave him the condensed version, mainly telling the story about drug dealers wanting their property back but not saying what the property was.

"Don't like drug dealers. They is the lowest scum of the earth," the man said.

Rick agreed.

The man went on, "Course, don't like cops, neither. They's just as bad."

Rick agreed again.

“Sometimes they come poking round, trying to find out if I got a still. The bastards.”

“You got a phone?” Rick asked again.

“Nope. Ain’t even got lectricity. I’m a-squatting this land. Belongs to the tree people, but they don’t pay no never mind. They just send me a letter once a year, telling me I gotta get off. But they don’t never try to move me. Name’s Lester Akins. What’s yers?”

Rick thought about it and decided it would be safer to be someone else, if the police came asking.

“Earl Lee Cobb,” Rick said, feeling good at the joke, and maybe getting a little revenge. “You think we can get these cuffs off?”

Lester held a candle close to Rick’s hands and squinted. “Need bolt cutters. Take all day to saw them off. I’ll take you down the road, my cousin’s got a garage, does some mechanic work sometimes. He’ll keep his mouth shet. Probably ‘bout time to get up anyway.” He found his shoes under a bed in the corner of the one-room shack.

Forty-five minutes later, the bolt cutters gave a loud snap, and the set of cuffs dropped to the floor. Rick rubbed his wrists. “Sure feels better.”

Lester and his cousin looked at each other. Both had a plug of tobacco in their cheeks, appearing almost identical in the gloom of the garage. Lester’s cousin dropped the bolt cutters into the toolbox at his feet.

“Phone’s over there,” Lester said, pointing.

Rick picked his way through an obstacle course across the garage--around old motors, mufflers, a car door and scattered tools.

Rick dialed Hectors Miami number, punching in his calling-card code. It rang six times.

“Pronto!” Hector finally said.

“OK, this is how we do it,” Rick said immediately. “I’ll be in Savannah tomorrow night. Give

me a fax number. I'm going to give you a map. You show up exactly twenty-four hours from now, you get your stuff. I don't give a damn if you bring anybody or not."

"Where's Ramon?"

"Probably in the hospital. He was in an accident. You want it or not?"

"Si. Fax the map, I'll be there," Hector said. He gave Rick the fax number.

"At 2:30 A.M. exactly. The place'll be marked on the map. Don't be late," Rick said. then hung up.

"Here's fifty bucks." Rick handed a bill to Lester's cousin. "Lester, can you take me to Savannah? It's worth another hundred bucks."

Lester fixed his cap on his head and spit a stream of tobacco juice onto the dirt floor of the garage. "We're outta here," he said, heading for the door.

CHAPTER 34

Ramon groaned and opened his eyes. He was in a hospital bed. The room was darkened, the only visible light streaming in from under the closed door. His face hurt. It felt as if someone had been beating him with a shoe for about an hour. He moved his head and grimaced at the pain. He held his right arm in the air and inspected it. There were no casts, and he could move it freely. He

went through a complete inspection of his body, holding out his left arm, lifting first his right leg, then his left. All of his appendages moved without much discomfort.

He flexed his jaws and nearly passed out from the wave of pain that engulfed his head. His nose felt twice its normal size when he cautiously touched it. Bandages swathed his face, and his tongue explored around the gauze pads surrounding his upper teeth.

He remembered being in Georgia, on his way to Savannah with Speed to get Hector's money, and Speed kicking him while he was driving. He squeezed the call button beneath his pillow and lay back.

After several seconds, the door opened quietly and a nurse moved to the side of his bed.

"How are you feeling?" she asked.

Ramon tried to reply, but the gauze in his mouth made it impossible to speak so he just grunted and pointed to his mouth.

"Open your mouth, and I'll take the packing off your gums."

He opened his mouth slowly and felt the gauze plucked away, then cool air flowed into his mouth. His three front teeth ached until he noticed that they were no longer there; his tongue finding an empty space and sore gums.

"You lost three of your front teeth in the accident, but you'll look fine with a partial. They make them now so you can't even tell. You want some water?"

Ramon slowly ran his finger over the blank spaces where three of his upper teeth had been.

She turned back to him and held a glass of water with a straw in it for him to sip.

"You probably hit the steering wheel."

He sipped some water. "What time is it?" he mumbled.

She cocked her wrist toward the light from the hall. "It's four-forty-five."

Ramon felt his face and the bandages wrapped around his head and across his nose.

“They had to pack your nose. It’s broken.”

He grunted. “I need to get someplace,” he said.

She looked at him, her smile on automatic. “That’s impossible. You’re in no condition to go anywhere. You may have a concussion and if you move around you might become unconscious.”

“Just get my clothes.”

“I can’t do that. You just lie down and rest. The doctor’ll be in around eight. Try to get some sleep.” She fluffed the pillow behind him and pulled the sheet over him.

Ramon relaxed but didn’t surrender. He was going to get out of here and get to Speed and the money. He knew Hector would be angry that Speed had escaped, and he also knew he’d have to redeem himself by recapturing Speed. He closed his eyes and concentrated on driving the pain from his mind, letting his tongue explore the tender gums and the gap where his teeth used to be. Speed would not win, he’d see to that.

The nurse left the room and closed the door again. Ramon waited for what he thought was about ten minutes, then sat up and eased out of the bed.

His head throbbed harder once he was on his feet, and he felt sick; but he held on to the bed and eased toward the closet across the room.

Finding his clothes in the closet and putting them on was done in slow motion. He had to move between spasms of pain radiating from his face and neck into his shoulders and then pause for a few seconds for it to subside.

Once he had his clothes on, he pulled his jacket tight around his chest, trying to hide the bloodstains down the front of his shirt. He made a decision to get some drugs to kill the pain; otherwise, he wasn’t going to be able to do anything reasonable.

When he opened the door to his room, the hall was empty and the hospital quiet. He eased along the hallway toward the nurses’ station by leaning against the wall and sliding along.

The nurse who had talked to him sat with her back to the door of the station and was writing on a clipboard when he slipped behind her. She jumped when he laid his hand on her shoulder.

“Oh, Lordy! You scared me to death. You can’t be out of bed. What are you doing?” She spoke in a rush, sounding as if all the words had been said through one long breath.

“Pain,” Ramon whispered.

She helped him sit in the chair next to her desk. “You just sit a minute.”

“Something for pain . . . “

She looked at the clipboard. “The doctor left instructions that you can have Vicodin. I’ll get you a couple. Just relax and stay right there.”

Ramon lay his head back against the wall as she unlocked the drug cabinet and thumbed through the medicines. She picked up a large bottle, removed the lid and bounced two capsules into her hand.

Ramon reached over her shoulder and grasped the bottle. She jerked around, dropping the capsules.

“You can’t---“

Ramon balled his fist and punched her chin. Her teeth clacked together and her eyes glazed over as she crumpled to the floor. He shook the bottle and verified that it contained the pills, and then he stepped over the nurse’s inert body and made his way toward the water fountain in the hall where he gulped three capsules. He made his way to the stairwell and started the torturous journey down the stairs and out of the hospital.

Somehow, Ramon found a phone booth between the sheets of flashing pain. He felt for change in his pocket, but had only one quarter. Then he leaned against the door to catch his breath and dialed the operator to place a collect call to Hector.

Hector accepted the charges.

“Jefe?” Ramon asked.

“Si. What is it?”

“I am in Brunswick, Georgia,” Ramon said. He told Hector what had happened.

“Desgraciado! You can’t even take care of a weakling gringo?” Hector screamed.

Hector gained control again and continued in a quieter voice. “Speed already called me. I’m coming up there. He says he’s going to give up the money, but I don’t trust him.”

“What do you want me to do, Jefe?”

“Get someplace safe, then call me back. Let me know where you are. I’ll pick you up on my way to Savannah.”

“Si. I will do that.”

“Do you have a gun?” Hector asked.

“No, Jefe.”

Ramon could hear the hesitation in Hector’s voice and knew he was controlling his anger.

Finally Hector spoke. “I’ll take care of it.”

Ramon replaced the phone and looked over his shoulder. The street was empty except for one delivery truck and a car with its trunk open. A young man threw tied bundles of newspapers onto the curb. Ramon thumbed through the book and found a listing for a taxi.

The cab arrived in five minutes, and as Ramon settled into the back seat, he told the driver to take him to Darien, Georgia.

“That’ll be twenty-five dollars.”

“No problem.” Ramon waved a wad of bills. “Get me a coke somewhere. I’ve got to take some medicine.”

CHAPTER 35

At 7:45 A.M., Morrow, Rivera and Sanders came through the door of the Chief of Detectives after barely knocking. They almost stumbled over one another in their excitement.

“Chief! We can get Affianta,” Rivera shouted.

“Calm down, son. Calm down,” the chief said.

“My CI just called,” Morrow said. “He’s meeting with Affianta at 2:30 A.M. tomorrow morning. He says we’ve got to be there.”

The chief held up a finger. “And where is ‘there’?”

“Savannah, Georgia,” Sanders said.

“He said he’d deliver Affianta to us,” Morrow said. “We gotta coordinate with Chief Deputy Wright, Sheriff’s office.”

“He also said to call the Brunswick, Georgia, P.D. Ramon Galendez is probably in some hospital there, he was banged up in a wreck on I-ninety-five,” Rivera said. “I’ve already alerted the GBI and Brunswick PD. They’re checking.”

“Great,” the chief said. “If we can pick up Galendez in Brunswick and Affianta tomorrow, we can wrap this thing up!”

Thirty minutes later the office door opened, and Susan Hoskins stuck her red hair through. “Got a call and a fax from GBI. Ramon Galendez was admitted to Brunswick Memorial Hospital.”

“All right!” Rivera gave the power salute.

“ . . . but he assaulted a nurse and walked out early this morning.”

“Damn,” Morrow said.

The fax paper rustled as she handed it to the chief, then continued. “He had bruises, teeth knocked out, a broken nose, and a mild concussion. Took an undetermined amount of drugs.”

The chief frowned. “Get your travel vouchers, boys. Coordinate with Morrow’s office and go

get the bastards!”

* * *

Rick turned off Dean Forrest Road onto the dirt path through the live oaks and magnolias at 8:00 A.M. that same morning. The trees arched over two shallow ruts, blocking out the sunlight and creating a diffused effect along the road. He drove over the spaced steel bars of the in-ground cattle gate and passed a herd of Black Angus grazing on both sides of the road.

The trees ended, and he rode across another cattle gate and into a yard dominated by a two-story house. White paint was peeling from the sides, and yellow dandelions decorated the yard. A broken tractor with one wheel lay in weeds next to a run down shed about fifty feet from the house. The shed was filled with spare parts, mostly rusted.

Rick banged on the horn a couple of times, then got out and stretched. A Blue-Tick hound came around the corner of the house. It started to bark, then recognized him and came up panting and wagging his tail so hard; it moved his rear feet through the dust. Rick bent over and rubbed the hound's ears and neck just as the screen door banged open and a woman came onto the porch.

“Hey, Rickiel!” she said. She had white hair worn in an old-fashioned bun and an apron with pink flowers over her long dress.

“Hey, Aunt Mary.”

She wasn't the relation kind of aunt to him, but she was to Billy Thompson. She was a good friend who was also a surrogate mother when his own mother was too drunk to pay him any attention.

He hugged her close. They hadn't seen each other since Billy's funeral.

“How you been?” he asked.

"I've been fine. Are you hungry?" she asked. "Just got some biscuits out of the oven and was getting ready to put on some bacon and eggs."

"I'd love it." Rick could hear his stomach grumble in anticipation.

"Going flying?" She waved toward the Ultralight on the trailer behind his car.

"Maybe later."

"Well, come on in and wash up. Breakfast'll be ready in ten minutes."

* * *

After he had eaten his eggs, sugar-cured ham and biscuits in sausage gravy, he went back to his car and started the motor.

It had taken him two hours of waiting in the rental car, watching his apartment and keeping his car in sight, before he decided it was safe and there was no surveillance. Then he had connected the Ultralight trailer on the ball hitch and drove to the farm, bringing along the YMCA bag.

He connected the portable fax machine he had bought that morning, to his cellular phone and dialed the number Hector had given him. When he heard the high-pitched squeal, he punched the send button and watched the hand-drawn map slip into the scanner.

After the fax machine had scanned the map, he unhooked it and dialed another number. Chief Deputy Wright answered. Rick told him to grab a pencil, gave him instructions, filling him in on the final plans, and then making suggestions.

"You've got to keep a low profile," Rick said. "He gets any idea at all that something's up, he'll be gone. By the way, James Morrow'll be calling you. He'll be in on this."

"You got everything straight between y'all then?"

“Not really. I still don’t like him, but he didn’t rip off the drugs,” Rick admitted.

“Did you get the other thing in Miami taken care of?” Wright asked.

“You mean the warrant?”

“Right.”

“I think so. They got a guy who was on the inside. He worked a deal. I think he’ll tell the truth. He’s got nothing to gain and everything to lose if he doesn’t.”

Rick explained the timetable again and had Wright confirm it, then asked him if he had any questions.

“None now. Can I get hold of you later?” Wright asked.

“If you need me, try me on my cell phone. I’ll be around today.”

Next, Rick dialed Hector’s number, got him on the phone and asked him if he had received the fax. He confirmed it. Rick checked his watch. “It’s ten-thirty now, you’ve got plenty of time. I’ll see you at two-thirty tomorrow morning. You’ll have the money, and this’ll be over. You go your way and leave me alone.”

Hector grunted. “I hope you are sincere. I need my property most urgently right now.”

“Yeah. I heard Earl Lee’s singing that old song.”

Hector remained silent.

“Well, as soon as I deliver, you can head on south, way south.”

“Just make sure you deliver,” Hector said.

* * *

Ramon got out of the taxi in Darien, Georgia, thirty minutes north of Brunswick. He walked half a block to a pay phone in the Greyhound Bus Lines building. Hector answered on the other

end. Ramon told him where he was, and then went on to explain that he was going to be in a motel across the street. The Southland Motel on Highway 17, across from the bus station.

Hector said he would pick him up at midnight, then they'd drive the forty-five minutes to Savannah, get the money, finish off Speed, then make connections for Colombia. It was time for a long vacation. Ramon agreed.

* * *

At 1:45 A.M. in the early hours of the next morning, Ramon got on the off ramp at Highway 204 and Interstate 95. Hector sat in the back seat of the Lincoln Town Car with Constanzia. Ramon felt better after sleeping all day, and the painkillers helped a lot.

"The first turnoff." Hector was looking at the faxed map. "Highway seventeen, then turn left."

Ramon found the exit then turned north, going under Highway 204. Ramon recognized the road as the same place Rick had lost them before.

Right after they went under the overpass, Hector pointed out the mobile home sales lot on the left, and Ramon turned onto Little Neck Road.

"It's three or four miles. Watch for a sign," Hector said.

Ramon saw the sign first, and then turned onto a paved road. A canal with steep sides bordered the west side. Ramon drove slowly, watching for the entrance to the L. Scott Stell Community Park Stagefield on the east side of the road. He found it and turned in. The headlights picked up the two iron bars that served as a gate to the stagefield. A chain linked the arms of the gate and was fastened by a combination lock.

Hector got out, went to the gate and looked around. The night was dark and without a moon. He put the muzzle of his nine-millimeter against the lock and blew it off, then pushed the

gate arms open.

The car's lights illuminated the stagefield strip in front of them. Ramon parked at the side of the tarmac, rolled the windows down, and checked the clock. It blinked 2:20 back at him.

"Turn on the lights," Hector said.

Ramon got out of the car and walked to a circuit breaker on a utility pole thirty feet from the car. He opened the metal door and flipped the only switch.

Six arc lights sputtered on, getting brighter as they warmed up--three on their side of the strip and three on the other side.

Hector and Constanzia got out of the car. Hector slid his pistol out of his belt, and racked the slide to make sure a round was in the chamber.

He looked around. They were alone. No cars, no Speed, nothing. Ramon looked his way and shrugged. The only sounds were insects and tree peepers.

Hector held up his hand. "Listen," he whispered.

A faint buzzing noise intruded upon the night sounds.

* * *

Rick could see the pinpoint of light ahead of him on the ground. Beautiful night, he thought. No moon, few clouds. Perfect.

He adjusted the Ultralight's throttle and climbed until his altimeter nudged 150 feet. He banked right, and then left, getting lined up on the splash of light below his feet, watching it grow larger. He picked out the white center line on the tarmac.

The lights of the old stagefield were pointed toward the ground, throwing all their illumination onto the ground, shading any observer from above and highlighting the garden plots.

It was a great target. As the distance closed, Rick could see a black car sitting next to the tarmac. Two people stood at the back of the car and another one was walking from the switchbox back to the car.

Their faces were turned up, looking into the full glare of the arc lights. Rick eased back on the throttle, adjusted the rudder, and started his run.

* * *

Hector shaded his eyes, looking up, trying to see the source of the buzzing sound. It was louder now; sounding like it was almost overhead. It must be a small plane. Maybe Speed was going to land on the strip. He walked around the trunk of the Lincoln and looked toward the end of the runway.

Just then, something smacked onto the runway five feet to the left of the yellow X painted in its middle. He strained to see as Ramon ran and picked up a bag, hefting it in his hand, then holding it up for Hector to see.

The airplane passed overhead, the engine revving up. Hector cursed and fired six shots into the dark night sky, trying to lead the sound, firing in front of where he thought the airplane might be. The reports from the nine-millimeter sounded flat, echoing off the trees in the distance. The buzzing sound grew fainter.

* * *

Rick pulled the stick back into his stomach and pushed the throttle open. The engine roared, and the Ultralight grabbed the sky, pulling itself up and away from the wash of lights below. The engine noise obliterated all other sounds. He banked gently to the east and headed toward the

farm. Just then the engine skipped. Rick craned his neck back, looking over his shoulder, not seeing anything unusual. He looked over his head at the plastic fuel tank. It was empty.

The Ultralight carried five gallons of gasoline. The flight had been carefully planned; it would only take thirty minutes from the farm and thirty minutes back, with ten minutes on station if needed. It had taken twenty-one minutes in and five minutes over the target. There should be plenty left; more than three-quarters to half of the tank. Instead, it was empty. The engine sputtered three times in quick succession, then died.

In the silence, Rick quickly looked at the altimeter with its penlight attached. Four hundred feet. Thanks to the thirty-two-foot wingspan, the Ultralight would glide a mile or two without power. Far enough to be out of Hectors reach. Still, landing at night in a strange field was enough to cause sweat to break out on Rick's forehead, even in the cool breeze. He could almost feel his butt squeezing shut and pinching the seat fabric. It surprised Rick when a laugh bubbled out of his throat. What the hell was so funny at a time like this? "The pucker factor!" Rick shouted into the silent night.

The Ultralight crossed a paved road, and he saw the dark silhouettes of triangular powerline poles, his eyes swinging back and forth, searching for an open field. It was better if he looked straight ahead, and then used his peripheral vision; he could see more clearly in a low light situation by looking obliquely rather than straight on.

The altimeter needle crawled past two hundred feet and a black canopy of trees blanketed the ground in front of him. He gradually banked to the right, then left, losing altitude quicker in turns than in straight flight.

One hundred feet! The trees disappeared beneath him. He swept over the roof of a house, the yard light a pinpoint below him. He was like a huge night bird, cruising silently on open wings.

Across the barn, swooping lower, then a fence. Dark shapes in an open field looked up as he

swooped over at under fifty feet.

Rick pulled the stick back. The Ultralight nosed up, slowed, coming close to a stall, then he eased the stick forward and the nose dropped, diving for the ground, building up some speed.

Ten feet off the ground, skimming along in silence, he saw another animal shape, pulled back on the stick, then forward, hopping over it. The cow trundled off into the dark.

Once more he pulled back on the stick, and the plane abruptly stopped, two feet off the ground, then smacked neatly onto the pasture, rolling and bumping over the grass. His hands were sweating and his goggles were fogged up. He let go of the stick and jerked them off his face.

Then the bungee cord on the right landing gear popped, and the undercarriage wheel support dug into the dirt. The Ultralight's right wheel stopped suddenly. The left continued, making circles in the damp grass, then it stopped.

Rick sat still. His head swimming, dizzy from ground-looping two or three times. His neck ached from the sharp twist. Then he unlatched the belt and crawled out of the seat. His knees were shaking. Other dark shapes stood thirty feet away, heads pointing toward him.

He inspected the airplane and found a neat hole in the back of the plastic gas tank, and another one in the top, on a straight line from the bottom one. He sat. Hector had shot at his noise and came close to hitting him. He rubbed his hands together, trying to stop the shaking.

He'd break the Ultralight down in a minute. First, he had to go to the bathroom and he didn't care if the cows watched.

CHAPTER 36

Hector watched through narrowed eyes as Ramon plopped the bag onto the trunk of the Lincoln and unzipped it. He reached in, fumbled around and then held up a pack of bills, showing red and bleeding gums where three teeth used to be.

“Let’s get out of here,” Hector said.

“What about Speed?” Ramon asked.

“Not now. We’ll take care of Señor Speed later,” Hector said. “Anyway, he can’t hurt us any more than your good friend Earl Lee already has.”

Ramon bowed his head. “Escusarse, Jefe. I should have taken care of him before he became a problem. It’s hard to believe that he talked. He wasn’t that kind, at least I thought---“

“You’re only allowed one screw up,” Hector said.

Ramon looked up in time to see the black hole of the nine-millimeter spurt red fire at him. The impact of the bullet knocked him off his feet; a dark hole in his forehead oozed a small trail of red slime. He lay on his back, the lights bright above him. His mouth opened and closed, but no words formed.

Constanzia stood frozen, her hand stopped midway to her nose with a pinch of white powder.

Hector picked up the gym bag, then turned to her.

She looked at the pistol in his hand extended toward her chest. A scream died in her throat as he squeezed the trigger; smothered by the gurgle of blood filling her lungs. She dropped to her knees, clutched her throat, and fought to breathe, then keeled over on her side. Her right leg twitched once, then her hands loosened, freeing the plastic bag of white powder.

Now there were only two loose ends. Rick Speed was one. Earl Lee would have to wait.

Hector moved briskly around the car, threw the bag on the front seat, and drove through the gate. He stopped at the intersection of the paved road, thought a second, then made a decision and turned left; the opposite way they had come in.

The headlights of the car illuminated the black asphalt pavement ahead of him. He was home free. With this three quarters of a million and the nest egg he had in the Cayman Bank, he would be in great shape. He'd go to Colombia, pay his respects, and let the Cartel know he appreciated their help over the previous ten years. He'd spread some money around as tribute, and then buy a small rancho in the mountains. He could become an advisor on smuggling. The Cartel could use him, even if he couldn't come back to the States or go to any country that had an extradition treaty. He'd assume another identity and have a little plastic surgery.

He swerved to miss a scurrying raccoon and immediately noticed a looming, black shape blocking the road ahead.

He blinked his eyes, and instantly the road was filled with swirling blue lights. He stood on the brakes, skidded to a stop and checked the rearview mirror.

* * *

Chief Deputy Norman Wright squeezed the button on the mike. "Alpha one, Bravo one."

“Alpha one,” James Morrow’s voice barked from the speaker.

Wright stood behind the driver’s door on his car, watching the headlights in front of him slow.

“He’s at our end,” Wright said.

“Ten-four. Be right there,” Morrow replied.

Wright grinned. Rick had laid a good plan. Canal Road ran for one mile and two tenths, paralleling a canal fifteen feet deep. One end was at Highway 204, and the other intersected with Little Neck Road. Discounting the entrance to the stagefield, there were no other exits.

The doper had no way out unless he wanted to run for it on foot. Morrow would close up behind him, and he couldn’t get through at this end. Norman Wright checked the load in his .38 caliber Smith and Wesson.

The headlights in front of him stopped a hundred feet away.

Wright flicked on the bullhorn speaker mounted on the top of his car.

* * *

Hector beat his fists on the steering wheel. Two police cars with their blue lights flashing blocked the road.

That deshonroso! Speed had no honor! He should have killed him on the island and forgotten the money!

He could see shadows behind the first two cars, knowing that more cops were there for backup.

He cursed, quieter now, trying to figure a way out.

“Hijo de estropear! I’ll kill that son of a bitch,” he shouted at the windshield, losing his temper again.

“Get out of the car with your hands above your head!” a bullhorn blasted through the night.

Hector slammed the car into reverse, jammed the accelerator pedal hard, and felt the rear wheels spin, skipping on the pavement. Then when the found substance, the car hurtled backward. Blue smoke billowed in front of the headlights as the tires screamed.

He watched the road in front of him, keeping the car in the middle, and then turned a hard left. The car spun in a circle, tires squealing. He jerked the gearshift, turned the wheels and stomped the gas pedal again.

The car screamed off, heading toward another set of flickering blue lights coming at him from the opposite direction, now only pinpoints in the distance.

He sensed water in the canal out his left window. He slowed, an idea forming.

He powered all the windows down, reached beside him and grabbed the gym bag, then twisted the steering wheel to the left and felt the car leave the bank of the canal and land with a splat in the middle.

The engine died. The car settled into the water, slowly at first, then the water rushed through the open windows and Hector knew how it felt to be flushed down a toilet.

Water swirled into the car. The headlights looked as if they were shrouded in brown fog. He took a deep breath, pulled the handle on the door and pushed.

The inside of the car was full of water; the headlights still a brown-orange smudge in front of him. As the water inside the car equalized, the door moved open. He pushed the bag in front of him and kicked away from the car. The car served as a springboard when he straightened his legs, then he was swept downstream by the current.

* * *

Norman Wright and James Morrow stood on the bank of the canal and watched. The car's headlights still shone under ten feet of water. The current was moving the car an inch at a time, nudging it toward the culvert at Highway 204, three hundred yards distant.

"Get a wrecker out here," Wright yelled.

Morrow stood, hands on his hips, "How you going to get a line on it?"

"Hell, I don't know!" Wright said. "Smalls! Get four or five guys, go to two-oh-four. Half of you on one side, half on the other. Work your way up and keep an eye out. The asshole's probably armed."

Tony Smalls had been with the Sheriff's Department for a year and was bucking for corporal. Wright knew he would take the assignment seriously, his first since he was moved out of the jail.

"He might've lost control," Smalls said.

Norman Wright thought a second. "No. He drove in. The bastard's going to get away."

Smalls started moving away. "We'll get him." Then he began motioning and directing the others to go with him. Wright knew Smalls would do his best to find him, even if he had to walk every inch of the swamp himself.

* * *

Hector held on to the edge of the culvert. He could hear someone giving orders on the road above.

"You three go up that side. We'll go up this side. John, you and Tom go downstream, one on each side of the canal."

Hector felt his way into the culvert, clutching the gym bag tightly in his right hand. He floated silently with the water, hoping there were no snakes.

As he neared the opening of the culvert, he could see flashlights moving along on the banks, one on each side. He grabbed the top of the culvert, scraping his fingers over the ribbed surface, but it slowed him.

He could see a beam of light play around the opening of the culvert, and then sweep downstream. He kept his fingers wedged in the grooves of the culvert, trying to hang on long enough for the search party to go downstream.

Then he saw the lights coming back, heard someone saying, "Let's check the culvert." He let his fingers slip loose and started to move with the flow again, and then he took a deep breath and went under.

* * *

Thirty minutes in the cold water, his legs cramped and stiff and his teeth chattering, Hector knew the search had passed him, or they had given up. Shivering and exhausted, he let the stream carry him away from the search party. He heard two men talking and could see their flashlights moving along the bank. The flashlight moved across the water twenty feet in front of him, then somebody else hollered, and the lights jerked into the trees bordering the canal, giving him enough time to float past.

He bumped into a log lying half in the stream and ending on the creek bank. Hector inched his way along the log and finally fell onto a grassy bank, then started a slow crawl up the side. As he reached the top, he peeked. Nothing. Dark woods, nothing else.

He stood up and started walking along the canal, downstream, shifting the gym bag from hand to hand every few minutes. He absently wondered if the squishing of the water in his shoes was loud enough for anyone else to hear. There had to be a house around somewhere and a car.

CHAPTER 37

Jesse Kinser sat across the desk from Rick. “So is Morrow satisfied?”

“I suppose so,” Rick said. “He hasn’t said anything to me,”

“Think they’ll find Hector?”

“He’s gone south. Nobody’ll see him for a while.” Rick propped his feet on his desk. “Thanks for taking care of my files.”

“No problem. Judge Clemmons wasn’t happy that you left, but everything went OK. He’s only interested in closing cases anyway. Making sure Atlanta knows he don’t have old cases on the docket is more important to him than anything.”

“Do you need any more for helping me?” Rick asked.

“Hell, no! You need me again, let me know.”

“I will. I might take a vacation.”

“You ought to go to my house in Micronesia. It’s empty, just sitting there. Well, maybe some chickens and pigs. You could be my yardman. Take care of the place.” Kinser snapped his fingers and sat up. “You could write a book about your caper.”

“Caper?” Rick laughed. “Maybe someday. If I take off, it’ll only be for a week or so. I’m tired of the law practice. Maybe I’ll get a real-estate license, move to Colorado or something.”

“I’m going to Micronesia when I retire,” Kinser said. “Get me a sailboat, cruise the South Seas. Get out of this crap.”

“You’ve been retiring for years.”

“I just might do it at Christmas.”

“Sure. What year?”

“I don’t know yet.” Kinser checked his watch. He stood up. “I’ve got to go. I got a creditor’s meeting, and I’m late.”

Rick heard the outer door close as Kinser left. He picked up a file from his desk. He knew it might be dangerous, just sitting in his office as if nothing had ever happened; but he knew the States were too hot for Hector right now, so he was sure he’d gone to South America. He needed to stay in town only long enough to close out his files, and he could do that in three or four weeks. He’d already called the indigent defense secretary and told her he wasn’t taking anymore court-appointed cases.

He looked up as someone stepped into the doorway of his office, surprising him and catching him unaware.

“Betty!” Rick started.

“Can I see you?” Betty Sims asked. “I need help. I don’t know what to do.”

He stood up. "Sure. Sit down." He motioned to the chair.

Her eyes were bleak, and she looked as if she had been crying.

"How can I help you?" he asked.

"I don't know where to start. I'm just." she bowed her head and held a handkerchief to her face. She sat rigid in the chair, knees held together, shoulders hunched, her bleached blond hair hanging over the sides of her face. It flashed through Rick's mind that women beyond forty should stop bleaching their hair.

Rick waited for her to speak. She sat sniffing into a handkerchief.

"What is it?" he finally asked.

"Billy . . . " she started. "I want to turn myself in."

"What do you mean?" he asked, frowning. Something struggled to get out of the forgotten places in his memory.

"I . . . " she sobbed, "I went to the hospital to see Billy. He was unconscious. I sat by his bed for a few minutes." She wiped her eyes, and then went on. "I loved Billy."

Rick stared. The first thought that came into his mind was that she wasn't ugly, just plain. But Christ, she was probably twenty years older than Billy. What about Libby? What about his kids?

She interrupted his thoughts. "He started mumbling. I thought he was awake, talking to me, but then I saw he was still out." She wadded the handkerchief in her hand into a tight ball.

Rick's mouth opened and shut without saying anything.

"He was saying words about Daddy. About bribes and money." She paused. "I put my hand over his mouth. I didn't know what else to do. If someone came in and heard him . . ." She broke down again and sobbed.

"My God," Rick breathed, disbelief showing in his voice and face.

"It was an accident," she said. "I just put my hand over his mouth, but he wouldn't stop saying those things about Daddy. He was twisting his head back and forth. I held my hand tighter." She wiped her face again, then blew her nose. "Then he stopped. I shook him, but he wouldn't wake up. Then the machine started buzzing. I was scared. I hid in the closet, in the back." She buried her head in her hands. "Then when everyone left, I sneaked out."

"Je-sus Christ," Rick exhaled.

She took a deep breath and sat back in the chair. "We were seeing each other since right after the indictment failed against you and Daddy. All that terrible publicity. I didn't believe any of it. Billy and I met at the Hilton and spent the night together. He said he loved me."

"You believed him?"

"Don't think I'm stupid." She sounded irritated. "I wanted to believe him, but I knew better."

"Why did you go on with it? You knew Billy was married, didn't you?"

She looked at Rick. "I knew. But I've always been the old-maid daughter of the Judge. There have been men, but Daddy would always run them off. Nobody was good enough for his beautiful daughter. My mother died when I was eight, and my father always needed me. There was no room for anyone else." She was pleading for understanding with her eyes.

"You didn't think it would be different with Billy, did you?"

"I've told you I'm not stupid!" She raised her voice. "Oh, I found out soon enough. Billy started talking about my father, saying he knew he was taking bribes, that he must have a good bit of money put away, things like that. I couldn't believe it, but he insisted. Said he needed a loan to get out of some trouble he was in. He wanted a hundred thousand dollars. Right then I knew why he was having an affair with me. It wasn't for me--it was to get to my father." She paused and took a deep breath. "Then on the Saturday night before he fell, he called me. He would meet me at the Hyatt. We planned to eat supper. He told me to forget about the money. He apologized. Said he was

sorry. He was wrong about my father. He asked me to forgive him.”

Rick leaned on the desk and looked into her eyes, trying to understand everything she was saying. It sounded like a fairy tale. Billy blackmailing Judge Sims? Having an affair with Betty?

She went on, “I was shocked, then I was happy. As happy as I’ve ever been in my life. I couldn’t believe it! I forgave him. He seemed relieved, then he left the hotel.” She slumped back in the chair.

She sat silent, wiping her eyes again. “He didn’t call again. I waited, then I heard of the accident. I went to the hospital to see him. I didn’t mean to hurt him. I knew it was over.”

“How?” Rick asked.

She looked at him. “Because every man I’ve loved has always been taken away. My father’s always seen to that.”

“Jesus Christ.” Rick drew the words out.

“I want to turn myself in. I’ll tell them about my father’s bribes. There were lots of them. He used to laugh about it when he showed the money to me. Will you help me do that?”

“Sure. I know just the guy.”

He dialed the number of the GBI office and asked for James Morrow.

While he was waiting for Morrow to come to the phone, he looked at the forlorn creature sitting in front of him. “I’m sorry, Betty.” Later he’d wonder why he’d felt that way. He’d never understand it.

* * *

Rick had closed all the cases in his office, all four of them. He checked to make sure that he had given his landlord thirty days’ notice and threw a copy of the letter to the Salvation Army in his

wastebasket. He had instructed them to come by the office on Friday and pick up all the furniture and equipment. He'd never been so happy, now that he was actually clearing out. He looked around, then propped his feet on the desk and unfolded the Savannah Morning News.

A two column, four-inch picture of Judge Sims was on the front page under blaring headlines. Suicide. Robert Sims, Judge Emeritus, Eastern Judicial Circuit, had put a .38 pistol in his mouth yesterday evening between six and eight o'clock and ended his illustrious thirty-year career.

A sidebar, with a picture of the judge's daughter when she was about twenty-five, told everyone in Savannah that she had turned herself into the GBI, confessing to the accidental homicide of Billy Thompson, newly made partner in the law firm of Livingston, Thompson and Associates, and implicating her father in illegal activities. Because the charges involved a state judge, the GBI was investigating. Agent James Morrow, a fifteen-year veteran was the agent in charge.

Page four carried a rehash of Billy Thompson's career. Rick wasn't mentioned. No apology. Nothing.

Well, he didn't expect anything. He made his own breaks. He could take care of himself just fine. It was all over.

The foundations of old Savannah were on shaky ground today. Two of the finest families had just plummeted to the murky depths. Hugh Livingston would be trying to find ways to eliminate every trace of Billy from the firm, probably in a few years Hugh'd be telling everyone he hadn't known him well at all. Oh that's right, Billy had married his daughter, but they weren't close.

Poor Betty wouldn't have to worry about her father anymore, or the love of her life, whoever that may be. Morrow would get promoted, most likely. Hector? He was probably living it up in South America, and Earl Lee was looking at long gray bars and counting the days.

The phone on Rick's desk jangled. "Rick Speed."

A beat of silence. Then, "I want the rest of my money."

Rick's heart swelled into his throat. He surprised himself by choking out a laugh. His pulse quickened.

"It's not a laughing matter, Señor Speed," Hector said.

"I'm not laughing." Rick couldn't stop the nervous giggle.

"Bueno. So how do you get me my money? There's five hundred thousand missing from the bag, Señor Speed. An important sum."

"Maybe you lost it when you went swimming."

"Possible. The bag was open, but I think you have it."

"Would you believe me if I said I didn't?"

Rick could picture Hector smiling his lizard smile.

"I don't think so, Señor Speed."

"Hey, call me Rick."

"Bueno, Señor Rick."

"Where are you?" Rick asked.

"South."

"Way south, I hope."

"Si. Far, far, south."

"Let me know if you ever get up this way." Rick gently replaced the phone.

He thought a few seconds; and then bit the cuticle off one fingernail.

Jesse Kinser answered the next call.

"Jesse. Rick. I've been thinking. That position of yardman still open? I just became seriously interested."

THE END